This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

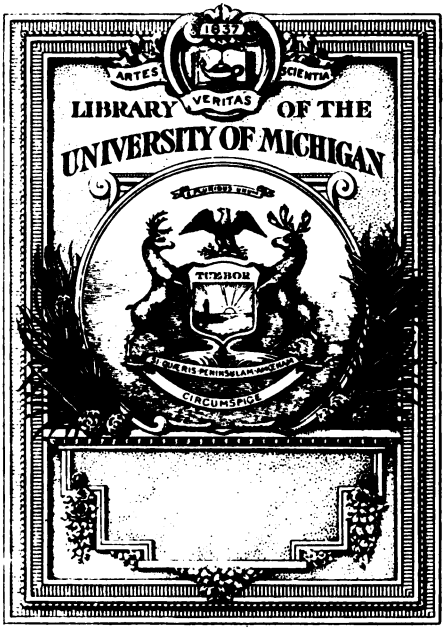
+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`


1837
ARTES
SCIENTIA
VERITAS
LIBRARY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
TUEBOR
CIRCUMSPICE

F 7116

TRYING OUT TORCHY

THEN VEE HESITATES AND SMILES DOWN AT ME.

TRYING OUT TORCHY

BY

SEWELL FORD

AUTHOR OF

TORCHY, ODD NUMBERS, ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

FOSTER LINCOLN

NEW YORK

GROSSET & DUNLAP

PUBLISHERS

COPYRIGHT, 1911, 1912, BY
SEWELL FORD

COPYRIGHT, 1912, BY
EDWARD J. CLODE

Replace.
Lib. Rep. 13.
12-16-24
11184

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	The Acid Test for Bertie	1
II.	When Algy Was in Line	21
III.	Trying a Wizard Stunt	39
IV.	Under Way with Uncle Rod	58
V.	Showing Teedy the Ditch	77
VI.	Scoring up One for Toots Boy	95
VII.	A Boost for the Benos	111
VIII.	Helping out at a Splice Fest	127
IX.	Getting from Under	145
X.	Striking a Level on Lamma-Lu	162
XI.	Piddie Gets One off the Bat	180
XII.	A Late Score for Vandy	197
XIII.	Torchy's Bonehead Hunch	214
XIV.	Catching a Signal	231
XV.	How Old Hickory Came Back	247
XVI.	Speeding up Uncle Andy	266
XVII.	A Kick in by Torchy	285
XVIII.	Picking up a Friend	304
XIX.	How the Glory Be Came Back	323

ILLUSTRATIONS

THEN VEE HESITATES AND SMILES DOWN AT ME . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

"YOU CAN BEHAVE NICE AT TIMES," SAYS VEE . . 19

"GREETINGS!" SAYS I. "WHAT'S THE NEWS FROM TIMBUCTU?" 59

A CASE OF WHICH COULD SPRINT FASTER . . . 160

WE GET A GREETING LIKE A FOOTBALL TACKLE . . 288

SAPPY STANDS THERE WITH HIS MOUTH STILL OPEN . 308

TRYING OUT TORCHY

CHAPTER I

THE ACID TEST FOR BERTIE

I AIN'T denyin' it, nor I ain't goin' hoarse tryin' to prove it, either. Maybe I am the highest salaried office boy in the business; and then again— Well, all I got to say is that when I ain't worth what I draw down on Saturday I want 'em to give me the chuck. And I'd hand that out to the whole Board of Directors as quick as I'd whisper it to Piddie.

For if anyone thinks this is a rest cure job of mine, sittin' here behind the brass gate and passin' offhand on who to let in and who to keep out, I'd like to see 'em turn the trick. Anyway, it calls for something you can't work out by any set of rules, or learn at a business college. And you can't go by your feelin's, either. Why, there's some I have to bar out that I'd like to slide through, and there's others I have to throw the switch for prompt and smilin' when if I had my way they'd get the sudden shunt.

But bein' foxy Freddie at one game don't qualify you to kick in at 'em all, does it? Every once in a while I discover that all over again. Here the other day was a sample, when I went up against it good and hard.

It wa'n't Vee's fault, anyway. I was tryin' to play a scratch infield hit for a three-bagger, I expect, and I used more speed than sense. But, say, when I finds she and Aunty has located temporary in some friend's apartment up on Riverside Drive, and I'd called her up on the 'phone just to ask how she was gettin' along, and she sort of hints that Saturday P.M. around six or so she might be either comin' in or goin' out, why—well, I was there.

It's one of these swell new joints with only a carriage entrance, ten stories, central court with real rubber trees, lily pond almost as big as a dinin' room table, and so on. There's a couple of near-Venetian stone seats around the pond, and after I'd bluffed the carriage opener by askin' if Aunty had left any word for me, I remarks that I guessed I'd better wait, and camps down where I can get a view in at the elevator.

Course, I was lookin' for Miss Vee to appear casual, and I'd framed up a cozy little chat there in the court, or maybe a short stroll down the drive with her. Why not? Anyway, I was in a real sociable frame of mind and wa'n't takin'

any special notice of the taxis and victorias comin' and goin', but was just indulgin' in rosy dreams and keepin' one ear stretched for a friendly hail, when all of a sudden I feels a tap on my shoulder from behind.

"Oh, you!" says I, kittenish. "Wonder if I can guess?"

And with that I swings around. Miss Vee? Nothing of the kind—Aunty! Uh-huh! Aunty, with her gold lorgnette up to her eyes and her mouth corners set stern. She ain't a very folksy old party at her best; but when she gets on that high society stare, and humps her eyebrows, she sure is a frigid proposition. For throwin' off sparks, though, she's a real live wire.

"Well, young man?" says she.

"Ye-es'm," says I, grinnin' foolish.

"I was told by the carriage man that you were waiting to see me," she goes on.

"He's a wonder, he is," says I. "Must have had that on his mind all of ten minutes, too. If I had a memory like that, I'd—"

"Evidently you haven't," breaks in Aunty sarcastic, "and if you still remember your errand perhaps you will state it at once."

"Why," says I, throwin' in the high speed thought gear, "I just dropped around, you know, to—to see if—if you got your trunks and things up from the steamer all right that day."

"Steamer!" says Aunty. "Why, that was weeks ago and— Oh! Now I place you. You are the young person who met Miss Ellins—the one Verona told me about?"

"Sounds like a complete description," says I.

Aunty almost smiles and puts on a knowin' look. "Perhaps," says she, "you would prefer to make further inquiries of my niece?"

"I wouldn't dodge it," says I, "if it's all the same to you."

"Why, to be sure," says Aunty. "She will be here in a moment. I dropped them at the florist's and— Here they are now! Pardon me if I don't wait."

And I should have suspicioned something of the kind the minute Aunty turned so oily. "They" consists of Miss Vee and a him. And he—well, I hate to knock a perfect stranger; but, honest, all I could think of was an upper case I with feet. He's one of these satisfied, contented big stiffs that can't seem to forget the image in the glass,—not just a Percy boy, understand, he was too husky for that; but a tall, wide shouldered, clean cut Reginald, with a sort of half bored, half amused look on his face, as if everybody else was some kind of a stale joke that had to be put up with until you got to the important business of admirin' him.

It's clear from Vee's surprised look, though,

that this wa'n't any put up job. She gives a little gasp as she sees me, and then a chuckle, and them gray eyes of hers kind of light up with fun and mischief.

"Oh!" says she, shiftin' a big bunch of orchids to her left hand and holdin' out the right. "I forgot, you know. Been waiting long?"

"Less'n a month," says I; "but, then, Aunty was here part of the time, and of course that helped."

"Really?" says Vee. "What did she—But you must meet Mr. Cutting. Bert, this is Torchy."

"Eh?" says Bert, tearin' his thoughts off'n himself for a second and gazin' languid at me. "Ah—er—I fear I didn't quite catch the name."

"I don't want to boast," says I, "but it's Torchy." Which brings another chuckle out of Vee.

"Ah!" says Mr. Cutting. "Rather odd, what? Torchy. Hum-haw!" and he smothers a yawn real polite.

"Don't mind me," says I., "Finish your nap."

"Beg pardon?" says he, starin' puzzled. "I—ah—think I haven't had the pleasure before. Live here?" And he rolls his eyes up at the windows around us.

"Me? " says I. "How foolish! Fifth-ave., when I ain't abroad, or at Newport."

"Ah!" says he, rousin' up enough to lift his eyebrows. "Very interesting, I'm sure," and with that he has a relapse back into himself, and I might have been one of the potted palms for all the notice he takes of me after that.

Worse than all, though, was the calldown I got from that quick glance of Vee's. She didn't say anything; but what she meant plain enough was that I'd been too fresh, joshin' her comp'ny that way. And then, when I tries to pass it over by gettin' off a few chatty remarks, she shrugs her shoulders careless and says how she don't expect to be in town much this season. They're off for Lenox next Monday, and after that there'll be a seashore house party at Swampscott perhaps, and later they'll be in the mountains—and so forth, don't you know. Anyway, it was nice of me to come around and say good-by; and before I know it I've got my chin down and I'm inspectin' my toes like a kid bein' sent home from school with a note to mother. Also Mr. Cutting is smilin' sarcastic and liftin' his hat.

"Chawmed to have met you," says he. "No doubt I shall run across you later on—at Newport," and he don't take any pains to hide the wink he tips Vee.

The neat comeback to that? Oh, sure, I thought of half a dozen—durin' the next hour. But, sad to relate, just at that special minute all the brilliant response I could think of was to work up a turkey red color in my ears, glare at him savage, and whirl on my heel. Oh, yes, a prize exhibition, that was; and for hours after I'm so proud of myself I'd been glad to had someone push me around the block with a No. 10 shoe!

Not that I didn't recover in time. But it wa'n't so gay that week, hearin' Izzy Budheimer and that Tessie girl of his plannin' evenin' trips over to Palisades Park, or seein' the young couples sittin' out on the steps down our block them moonlight nights, with me doin' the lonesome sentry stunt.

Lenox and Swampscott Beach and the mountains, eh? Well, I knew a queen that was floatin' around them places, all right! But it struck me I came mighty near bein' a two-spot in the discard; and, while I ain't great on sympathizin' with myself, I guess there was a few days when my chest-measure must have been subnormal.

Maybe I'd got farther into the dumps than ever if it hadn't been for Piddie to take it out on. He'd cheer up any but the most chronic grouch, just to watch him get wild over little things. By accident I discovers that one of the

lady typists had been a country telegraph operator, back home in Ohio; so I digs up an old pocket clicker I used to monkey with when I was killin' time on the A. D. T. bench, and, with her usin' the space bar on her machine, we brushes up enough on the code so we could spell out quite a few remarks across the room. And Piddie he nearly froths at the mouth because he can't locate what's goin' on.

We was so busy at it, here the other mornin', that the first thing I knew there's Old Hickory standin' at the door of his private office, scowlin' heavy and listenin'. No foolin' him, either. He traces the clicks to me, first shot.

"Boy," he growls, "what are you making that infernal racket with?"

I holds the clicker up and grins. "Just practicin', Sir," says I.

"Huh!" says he. "Think that's what you're paid for, eh?"

"No, Sir," says I. "If it was I'd be gettin' more a week."

And you should have seen the picture of horror spread over Piddie's face at that. It was worth riskin' gettin' fired just to watch. But instead of bringin' out the purple blotches on Mr. Ellins' cheeks, like repartee of that kind gen'rally does, he cocks his head on one side, stares at me squint eyed for a minute, and then holds up one finger.

"Boy," says he, "come in here!"

Well, I didn't know whether it meant bein' used as a floor mop, or just meetin' sudden death; but I leaves Piddie holdin' his breath and walks in with the best imitation of a smile I could fake up. Old Hickory don't act murderous at that. He's sittin' in his big mahogany swing chair chewin' a cigar thoughtful, and he lets me shiver on the rug awhile before he looks up.

"How much do you know about using that thing?" says he.

"Eh?" I gasps out. "Oh, this? Why, I can dribble out words on it; but I ain't any Flicker McCann."

"Flicker who?" says he.

"McCann," says I. "Used to be the crack A. P. sender on the Western news wire."

"I see," says Mr. Ellins. "Pupil of his, are you?"

"Gee, no!" says I. "All I know is what I picked up from Pat Burns, manager around to No. 19 when I was wearin' the cap. Tried to work me in on the key so I could take locals while he played pool next door."

"But could you read a message as it was ticked off?" says he.

"Sure," says I, "unless it was comin' from one of them flossy Morse wizards that makes it sound like a buzz saw."

"How about wireless sending?" says he.

"Cinch!" says I. "They don't rip it off so fast. It's like readin' big print."

"Humph!" he grumbles, shuttin' his teeth solid on the cigar while he inspects the ceilin'. "You seem to have an amazing number of fool accomplishments. I've a mind to test the utility of this one."

"Go as far as you like, Mr. Ellins," says I.

"Understand, though," he adds, "I'm relying a good deal on a discretion which you seldom exhibit. But there's no one else I can ask."

"As long as I ain't picked for the hope of the white race," says I, "or sent out distributin' suffrage literature, I'll do my best. It ain't blockin' a subpœna server, is it?"

No, it was a strictly business proposition, with a society twist. There was a pool of some kind, with a lot of the big money bunch in it; but one of the crowd was a young fellow who'd been rung in just because he'd inherited Papa's seat on the Exchange and Papa's big holdings, and he'd shown signs of weakenin' when he found how deep he was gettin' in. Course, there was nothin' to hold him but his word; but he hadn't been tried out in a gentlemen's agreement before. Thirty-six hours more was all they asked him to stick by them; but if he went to dumpin' his stocks on a wabbly market ahead

of time the fat would be all over the gas stove.

And see how Old Hickory handles a case like that! He don't shake a club at Mr. Weak Knees, or sick a lot of bonehead gumshoe men on his trail. He simply wires Mrs. Ellins to invite the young man up to their Newport place for a week-end, and has her send the steam yacht down after him. Ain't that smooth? And to keep his mind off business cares Mr. Ellins suggests that Miss Marjorie and some of her friends better come along too.

"But, blast it!" says Old Hickory, "it has just occurred to me that the *Althea* has a wireless outfit aboard. See?"

"I get you," says I. "You want me to sneak on, put the machine out of business, tie the operator to the binnacle, and—"

"Say, young man," breaks in Old Hickory, "do you think this is a moving picture drama? Tie nothing! You go as my special messenger, with a tin document box which you are to deliver very carefully to my son Robert. He'll be surprised to get it; but that doesn't matter. What I want you to do on the way up is this: keep an eye on a tall, good looking young chap with an exaggerated sense of his own importance. His name is Cutting—Albert Dunn Cutting."

"Z-z-zing!" says I, under my breath.

"Eh?" says Mr. Ellins. "Oh, I thought you spoke. Yes, Cutting. Watch him close, keep near the wireless cabin,—it's a little coop just aft of the bridge,—and listen for a selling order. If he starts a message, you are to take him one side, beg his pardon politely, and hand him the note I'm going to write now. Got that all clear?"

Did I have it? Why, I could have said it backwards. Well, well! Bertie boy! Might meet me again, eh? That was a joke—once. W'at ho! To have a swell yachtin' trip thrown at you offhand, and then a bonus like this hung up besides! Say, I was so afraid of showin' how tickled I was that I must have overdone the business.

"Come, come!" says Old Hickory. "If it's going to bore you like that—"

"It ain't," says I. "I was only wonderin', in case I did have to slip anything over on this Mr. Cutting, if it would hurt his feelin's bad."

"Hang his feelings!" snorts Old Hickory. "He's an overbearing young puppy, and if he's cad enough to take advantage of my hospitality to try any of his tricks on me, I want him to squirm for it. He will too, if he has occasion to read what I'm going to write. And if he doesn't cancel that selling order within five minutes after, you file a message to that effect and I'll spring a surprise on him that

he won't get over in a lifetime. But I'd rather not just now, and let's hope he behaves. That's all. I've ordered the *Althea* to sail from East 23d-st. at eleven-thirty, and you may have half an hour to get your toothbrush and extra collar and report back here. Send Mr. Piddie in as you go out."

"Toothbrush and extra collar," thinks I, "for a trip to Newport! Gee!" I've no sooner shooed Piddie through the door than I rushes into the filin' department, backs Izzy Budheimer into a corner, and makes a deal to hire his sporty new vacation outfit that he'd just been showin' me in the coatroom,—two-piece white flannel suit, with white canvas shoes to match, and a white felt hat. Izzy'd been gatherin' the costume at bargain sales against the time when he makes his annual splurge at Far Rockaway; but, as that event was two weeks off and I was wavin' three whole dollars at him enticin', he couldn't resist.

"All right," says Izzy, swallowin' hard; "but see you pull them pants up every time you sit down."

"Izzy," says I, "I won't think of anything else."

And talk about class! You should have seen me after I'd had a half-hour session in the chief engineer's stateroom and starts to walk aft. There was Marjorie, strainin' the seams of her

blue yachtin' costume; and a long necked, frizzy haired young lady friend of hers; and a giddy lookin' middle aged blonde with jet ear pendants that I took for a widow doin' the chaperon act; and in the center of the group, leanin' back graceful with his cigarette, was Mr. Cutting, enjoyin' his own society and not botherin' much about anything else. I could see Marjorie's eyes bug out as she gets her first view of the new arrival, and a minute later she comes skippin' over.

"Why, Torchy!" she squeals. "How do you happen to—"

"S-s-s-sh!" says I, wavin' her away mysterious. "Cut it out!"

"But why?" says she, gawpin'.

"I'm incog," says I. "Important business. Make out you don't know me."

"How absurd!" says she. "Besides, there's someone else on board who will. She's in the after saloon. Wait. Oh, Vee! I say, Vee!"

And there was no place to dodge, either. Out she comes, lookin' more stunnin' than ever in her white serge. And perhaps them big eyes of hers don't open up some!

"O-o-o-oh!" says she. "Why, it's Torchy!"

"And doesn't he look great, though?" gushes Marjorie.

"Awfully smart," says Vee. "But how—why—"

"S-s-s-sh!" says Marjorie. "He's on a secret mission. Important! In disguise, you know!"

"My, my!" says Vee, rollin' her eyes. "Really?"

"Terribly exciting, isn't it?" Marjorie rattles on. "Almost gives you the shivers to—"

"Ah, can it!" says I. "Humorous stuff like that's too good to waste on me. Save it for a disk record."

But you know how girls are when they think they've dug up a real funny thought all by themselves. There's no chokin' 'em off. So I walks away and leaves 'em gigglin' and chucklin'. Oh, yes, they had a perfectly good time for awhile, exchangin' boardin' school josh, tiptoein' past with their fingers on their lips, and even stalkin' me with a camera to get snapshots. That's Marjorie! For a heavyweight cutup she's the limit, and Vee follows her lead.

And me? Well, I'd been jarred into showin' the wrong side of my disposition once, and now I wa'n't battin' an eyelash. Besides, I was on my job. There was a certain party aboard that was goin' to get all the attention I had to spare, and until I'd got him right I couldn't bother with anything else.

But if Mr. Cutting had business worries on his mind he didn't show it. He stretches himself out comf'table as we skims along up the East River and into the Sound, lights a fresh cigarette now and then, and listens languid to the jolly the blonde widow seems to be puttin' over. Then, when the girls get tired of havin' fun with me, he allows them to join the admirin' circle.

So I move off to locate the wireless man, asks him if he's usin' Morse or the Continental, gets him to admit that the air is as full of holes as a Swiss cheese to-day, and then reads all the baseball news in two noon extras I've brought along. Still Mr. Cutting shows no signs of gettin' nervous.

"Gee!" says I to myself. "He's got to that's all!"

So after lunch I begins. The first two or three times that I walks past and shoots over the suspicious squint at him he hardly notices; but I keeps it up, pacin' back and forth reg'lar, until I catches him followin' me out of the corner of his eye. Next I notices him askin' somethin' of Marjorie, hears her giggle, and I knows she's tellin' him how I'm on a special job for Papa. He appears kind of int'rested at that.

My next move is to hold up the wireless operator as he passes by, ask more fool ques-

"You Can Behave Nice At Times," Says Vee. *Page* 19.

UNIV. OF MICH.

tions about how the juice is workin', and then casually remark that I suppose Wall Street ain't quieted down any since the mornin' flurry. Course, he ain't heard anything of the kind, and likely wouldn't if it had been so; but Mr. Albert Dunn Cutting pricks up his ears.

As a follow up to this I tries fixin' Bertie with a sleuthy stare from behind a newspaper. It got him, too. He wiggles around more or less, twists his neck every other minute to see if I'm still at it, misses conversation cues, and begins to look at his watch. Fin'lly he breaks away and starts pacin' the deck, and as he goes up one side I goes down on the other. I spots him lookin' anxious at the extras I has in my pocket; so I tosses 'em overboard.

It was two-fifteen, with three-quarters of an hour before the gong would stop tradin' for the day, and I judged that Mr. Cutting knew all about it to the fraction of a minute. He paces up as far as the wireless coop, and I leans over the rail to give him all the rope he needs. But all he does is look in and then go back to the girls. They don't find him very entertainin' comp'ny, though. Two minutes more and he's up pacin' again, and at two-thirty exactly he's askin' the wireless man for a blank.

"Aha, aha, aha!" says I to myself.

He scribbles off something nervous, hands it to the operator, and starts back to his chair

But I'm right there in his path, with Old Hickory's note all ready to hand over.

"Excuse me for buttin' in," says I; "but are you dead sure you want that sent?"

"Eh?" says he, stoppin' short. "Oh, the message? Why, have you heard from the match?"

Then it was my turn to gawp.

"Tennis finals, you know, up at Newcastle?" he goes on. "Lantry's a chum of mine, and I'm anxious to know how he's coming on with the English champion. You had some extras, didn't you? Anything in them, may I ask?"

Don't sound like a bluff, either. He goes on to say, too, how he kind of hated to use Mr. Ellins' wireless so free; but—

"Ah, squash!" says I, takin' a deep breath at the thought of how narrow I'd missed makin' a chump of myself. "Use him? Why, that's what he's here for. Who you tryin' to call, the ticker people? Ah, they're dead ones on events like that. Say, lemme call up Whitey, who's the only real live sporting editor in New York. He's a friend of mine, and he'll give us the latest, Mr. Cutting."

How did I know, after all? Say, didn't I read his message, while I was writin' mine to Whitey? And then didn't I boss that operator around like I owned the boat until he gets us

the complete score and Mr. Cutting knows all about how his friend had put it all over the British champ? Well, I guess! He appreciates it too, and when he walks aft again Bert is pattin' me on the back like I was a long lost brother, and he's so woke up and good natured that he lets the frizzy haired girl lead him over to a shady corner to tell him the story of her life. And as the widow has found her place in a novel she's tryin' to read, and as Marjorie beats it below for her reg'lar afternoon nap, it's a case of Vee and me with the deck to ourselves.

She opens by hitchin' her chair up. "You can behave nice at times, can't you?" says she.

"Guess I ain't any star performer, at that," says I.

"You don't have stupid spells, though, I hope?" says she, glancin' over at Bert, who's tryin' to smother another yawn.

"Depends some on the comp'ny," says I. "Just now I feel real wide awake."

"Think it will last?" says she.

"When my foot goes to sleep I'll let you know," says I.

"Silly!" says she. "Let's go up toward the bow, where the breeze is better."

Well, we did. Also who was it sits up front with Vee and watches the moonlight after dinner? As the other four was playin' auction

bridge on the after deck, I'll give you one guess. Uh-huh! Little Willie, all dolled up in white, and yachtin' up to Newport like a bloomin' plute! Course, it don't last forever, and next mornin' early it's me packin' up to catch a train back. But that was some evenin'!

"How about young Cutting?" says Old Hickory, as I shows up next afternoon.

"Full of nicks," says I, tossin' over the note I'd come so near makin' a fool play with; "but, barrin' that, he's straight as a string. Anyway, I found out that stock deals don't worry him much, and I guess all that perfectly good yacht sleuthing I done was a total loss, Mr. Ellins; but any time you've got more of it to hand out, don't be afraid to call on me. Next throw it might take."

CHAPTER II

WHEN ALGY WAS IN LINE

THAT was what you might call an errand de luxe, though. They don't come every day, even to a star performer like me. Honest, there's days and days at the Corrugated when things drift along without any more help from me than your ordinary cheap skate office boy could hand out. Course though, I'm right on deck when they do need me. Meantime such specimens as Algy keeps things from gettin' too monotonous.

We'd had Algy much as five or six weeks, and he'd come to be a reg'lar standin' joke here at the Corrugated. You know. Every big office has one that's as much a part of the fixtures as the copy press or the spring water tank. They come in handy, too, keepin' the force cheered up on dull days, and actin' as sort of escape valves for all the cheap humor that can't be unloaded on anyone else.

How Algy ever dodged bein' a man milliner or a floor walker in the cloak and suit department, I couldn't figure out; for he had all the points. One of these mushy lookin', soft

spoken, biscuit haired, white livered, young wrist slappers, Algy was; with a complexion as ruddy as a pail of lard, skim-milk blue eyes, and a set of parlor manners that was as good as a correspondence course in etiquette just to watch.

Up and down there was quite a lot to Algy; but he was thickest through at about the point where his throat apple bulged through his white wings collar. And in his long sack coat and narrow patent leather shoes he certainly was ornamental to have around the office.

It was Old Hickory's idea of having a man stenographer added to the staff. As he explains careful to Piddie, there was times when he just naturally had to cuss durin' business hours, and, while some of the lady typists was fairly well broke in, he couldn't always do justice to his feelin's with them takin' dictation. So he gives orders to take on a man shorthand expert, that wouldn't turn pink and swallow his gum when he really cut loose.

And Piddie, who's got a head on him like a lima bean—well, he picks Algy for the job. First mornin' he shows up at the gate and announces who he is I could hardly believe it.

"Honest?" says I. "Why, you bold thing! Sure you ain't mistook this for a mother's help 'sit'?"

Algy, he only smiles kind of weary and asks where he shall hang up his hat and coat.

"Ladies' cloakroom to the right, men's to the left," says I. "Take your choice, Algy."

But there's no gettin' a rise out of him, though. I tried him out good and plenty that first week without rufflin' a feather, and you can bet if the jabs I sent in didn't get home, nothin' Izzy Budheimer and them other flat-heads could think up would have any effect.

For, in spite of his meek ways, Algy had a hide like a sole leather trunk. Seemed like he was used to that sort of joshin' and didn't mind it any more. Algernon Rogers Pratt was the name he registered with the cashier; but he'd answer to Miss Pratt, or Algy dear, just as cheerful as he would to anything else.

"Come, Deary," I'd say to him, "fix your side combs and trot into the private office: Mr. Ellins is ready for you."

And I wouldn't get so much as a pout from him. So of course as a joke he got a little tame to me.

He wa'n't a joke to Old Hickory, though. He was just a disappointment. I didn't tumble to how the boss was takin' Algy for near a week, either, and then one day I happened to be in at the desk just as Algy gathers up his notebook and glides out. Old Hickory turns and glares after him savage, and then rips out

a few atmosphere scorchers that almost blis ters the varnish.

"Phew!" says he, stoppin' for breath. "I've been keeping all that bottled up for the last hour. Torchy, where in the merry Mithridates did Mr. Piddie ever find such a limp spined specimen?"

"Who, Algy?" says I. "Why, that's his idea of a man stenographer, I guess."

"Huh!" snorts Mr. Ellins. "That isn't a man: that's a parody. He ought to be wearing a tube skirt and doing fancywork. Why, when he's in here I don't feel that I can even say darn, and it's getting on my nerves."

Old Hickory must have let out some of this in other quarters, too, judgin' by the way Piddie proceeds to rub it into Algy every chance he gets. Course, the thing to do was to give him the chuck first payday, but, as I understands it, Mr. Ellins won't have that. He sticks out for a straight deal towards the help, Old Hickory does, and one of the red ink rules of the Corrugated is that nobody gets the can tied to 'em unless they've earned it good and proper. Personal grouches don't count with him, and he follows his own dope.

But, say, between Piddie goin' sour on him that way, and all the rest of us usin' him as a comic feeder, Algy's workin' hours couldn't have been a dream of delight.

He don't squeal, though, or even so much as run out his tongue by way of gettin' back at us; and I don't know as you can blame us much if we kind of got into the habit of treatin' him as if he wa'n't exactly human. You know how it is? All I could see to Algy was a sort of livin' machine that could take dictation like a streak and thump a typewriter until he almost had the bearin's hot. That he might have a home somewhere, and relations, and private ideas of his own about things, never struck me until—

Well, it was one afternoon here a week or so ago. I'd jumped out on the stroke of five and was two blocks away before I remembers about an extra bunch of letters Piddie had told me special to dump in the substation. So it was a case of beatin' it back and gettin' 'em. The scrubwoman was already on the job as I got off at our floor; but there wa'n't anyone else in sight.

That is, I didn't see anyone as I dashed in, and I'd grabbed the letters and was turnin' to rush out again, when over in the corner I spots this grief spectacle. It's Algy, slumped forward on his little typewriter table, his head between his arms, and his shoulders heavin' up and down from deep emotion. Course, I couldn't resist a good chance like that.

"Well, well!" says I. "Workin' the sprinkler, eh? How harrowin'!"

Algy, he straightens up for a second at that, and when he's seen who it is he caves in again. But it's long enough for me to see I was wrong on the sprinkler guess. However bad he felt, he wa'n't leakin' any brine over it.

"Enjoyin' a dry one, eh?" says I. "Well, what's happened now? Some of the lady typists been actin' catty?"

"Please, Torchy!" says he, shakin' his head sad. "I—I don't wish to talk about it."

"Ah, it'll do you good to get it out of your system," says I. "Come on, now, who's behaved horrid to you? Piddie been naggin' again?"

"Oh, I don't mind Mr. Piddie," says Algy. "He—he isn't fair, that's all. But Mr. Ellins —well, he had no right to say it."

"Old Hickory, eh?" says I. "Oh, I can guess. Something went wrong, I expect, and he turned on the lurid language. Tore off some real naughty words, did he?"

Algy nods. "Never in all my life," he begins, "did I ever hear such—"

"Well, you stick around the Corrugated awhile longer," I breaks in, "and you'll hear more. But don't you care. He don't mean anything by it."

"But I didn't care," says Algy. "It was his apologizing afterward that hurt."

"Whe-e-e-ew!" says I. "Old Hickory apologized, did he?"

"Not in fun, either," complains Algy. "He—he meant it. Apologized to me just as if I was—was— But I'm not going to stand it. I'm going to quit, that's all!"

"Stop your kiddin', Algy," says I. "You wouldn't want to break his heart that way."

"Oh, I know," says Algy, real bitter. "I'm a joke. I've always been a joke. But I'm through being one. I'll show him, and everyone else! They'll see! I'm going to clear out now and do what I've always wanted to do—Aunt Hattie or no Aunt Hattie."

"Eh?" says I. "Hadn't heard of her before."

"She's the one I've been living with since Mother died," says Algy. "It's on her account I've been staying and putting up with all this. She didn't want me to go. She always cries and takes on every time I speak of starting West and being a cowboy."

"Wh-a-a-at!" I gasps. "Say, Algy, put that last across once more, so I'll be sure my ears ain't members of the Ananias Club. Cowboy, did you say?"

"Why not?" demands Algy, stiffenin' up.

And when I'd caught my breath once more

and smoothed my face out, I made him give me the details. And, say, folks get queer quirks, don't they? I expect lots of us has some sneakin' idea that sometime or other we'll be this or that; an idea that we keep tucked away private and don't often talk about. But Algy as a cowboy! Can you surround it?

"How long you been feedin' this bug?" says I.

"Why, a long time," says Algy. "I began thinking about it when I was clerking in the store."

"Aha!" says I. "I knew! Ribbon counter, wa'n't it?"

"Why, all over," says Algy. "You see, Father used to have a little fancy goods store on 125th-st. Then when he died Mother kept it on, with Aunty to help. I was brought up in the store, as you might say. I didn't want to be a clerk; but there was no escape. A boy of ten can't say what he'll do. I had rather have been out playing with the other fellows, of course; but they wouldn't let me. Besides, they needed me to help in the store. Yes, I've sold ribbon, miles of it; and lace, and corsets, and hosiery, and embroidery silks. And I've been days almost without speaking to a boy or a man—just women. But I couldn't help it, I tell you! I hated it, hated it!"

I wouldn't have thought, either, that Algy could look so fierce, or that he had such a deep voice.

"I used to read and think and dream about being something different," he goes on. "I wanted to live out in the open air, out in the sun and wind and rain, and be a man among men. I could, you know. I'm not so weak and soft as I look. But what chance have I had, brought up among women in a fancy goods store? Then, when the big department stores crowded us out and we had to close, and Mother died—well, I had to do something. And all Aunty would let me try was stenography; so I—I'm that! But I'm through! There! Hang the old notebook!" And bang it goes, clear across the room. "Drat the beastly pencils!" Algy sends a shower of 'em against the safe. "Darn the old typewriter, too!" With which he lands a kick on the tin cover of the machine.

"Fine!" says I. "But what next?"

"Why," says Algy, "now I'm going home and tell Aunt Hattie that I start to-morrow to be a cowboy."

"Algy," says I, "don't."

"But I will," says he. Algy has his chin up too, and his shoulders back, and there's a businesslike look to the way he holds his jaw.

"Just as you say," says I; "but lemme give

you this tip: You won't be out among them flannel shirts two days before they'll have you skinned alive. Why, Algy, don't you know you'd be as welcome on some ranch as a pussy-cat in a roomful of fox terriers! Go on, Algy; but as you're jumpin' across the prairie some night, with your eyes bugged and a bunch of frolicsome beef producers behind tryin' to shoot the heels off your shoes, just remember that you was warned."

"Pooh!" says Algy. "Cowboys don't do that sort of thing nowadays, you know. Besides, if it comes to that, I could do a little shooting too."

"What with," says I, "an air rifle?"

And that was the first time I'd ever fetched a pout out of Algy. "See here!" says he. "You come up to Henry's with me now, and I'll show you whether I can shoot or not!"

Well, just for the fun of it, I let Algy tow me up to a gallery on Eighth-ave. I stood one side while the boss dug out a special gun that he seemed to keep reserved for him. It wa'n't any .22-short affair, but a real blue steel baby cannon with life sized bullets. And, while I ain't any judge, I should say by the way Algy rung the bell and blew up the clay pipes that he was some crack.

"Good work!" says I. "You must have burned some powder here."

"Ask Henry," says he. "It was nearly five years ago that he began to teach me to shoot."

"What about ridin' them buckin' bronchos, though?" says I. "You know they don't herd steers in taxicabs."

"But I can ride some too," says Algy. "You shall see. Come up to Morland's."

"Morland's, eh?" says I. "Say, Algy, why the disguise? Why didn't you tell us you was a plute sport?"

"I'm one of the evening instructors there, that's all," says he. "Of course, I had to pay at first; but I got them to give me lessons at odd times for half price. And, say, they've just brought in a new mustang that's rather lively. If you don't mind waiting a few minutes, too, I'll get into my cowboy costume and bring out my lariat."

Say, there was no hot air about Algy's talk. He produced the goods. I couldn't hardly believe it was him, either, with them fringed things on his legs, and the spurs and the wide brimmed hat. Honest, he looked the part, and the stunts he did on that wicked eyed little mustang you wouldn't believe. Then when it come to the lasso business he had me with my tongue out for fair. You've seen 'em twirl the rope in them gunpowder shows they used to have at the Garden, makin' a loop and jumpin' through it, and all that? Well, what does

Algy do but jump the blamed pony through his loop, and him in the saddle all the time.

"And you mean to say you've always lived in New York, too?" says I.

"I've never been west of Paterson," says Algy. "But, you see, this is the sort of thing I've lived for. I've spent all my spare time and money on it, so as to be ready when my chance came. Now, take throwing the rope; an ex-cowboy whom I found working in a livery stable taught me to do that. But I had to practice hours and hours, week in and week out. I was bound to get it, though."

"Guess you have," says I. "Algy, you're a wonder! Still, when it comes to mixin' with one of them ranch crowds, I can see your finish."

"Oh, I guess I can take care of myself," says he. "I'm going to try, anyhow."

I expect, too, if it hadn't been for this little session with Algy, I'd never noticed the argument a pair of gents was havin' in the seat across from me, ridin' down in the Subway. One was a tall, flashy dressed party, and the other was a short, thickset duck that answers to the name of Mandelbaum and converses mostly with his hands.

"Vell, fire him, vy don'd you?" says Mandelbaum.

"After me bringin' him clear on from San

Antonio to play the part?" says the other. "You said get the real thing, and he's it. Anyway, he has a reputation as a gun fighter, and claims to be the champion broncho buster and lariat juggler of ten counties. But he missed three rehearsals this week, and we can't have him spoil three thousand feet of films on us, can we?"

"Vell, fire him, fire him!" insists Mandelbaum.

"But, my dear man," says the other, "I can't go out on Broadway and pick up cowboys at a moment's notice. Who can I get to fill his place?"

"Excuse me for buttin' in," says I, "but maybe I've got the answer."

It was a brassy thing to do, I admit; but I'd got more or less int'rested in Algy's case, and it was worth a chance. After starin' a minute they gave me an openin', and first thing I knew we was each statin' our case. Seems this Mr. Kreegan, which was the name of the other gent, was up against it. He was manager of a big movin' picture outfit and had a bunch of forty people somewhere over on Long Island rehearsin' for one of them film dramas,—"The Cowboy's Wooing," or something like that.

He explains how they was sparin' no expense to get the right people for the leadin' rôles, which was why he'd brought on this Red

River Bill from so far away. But Bill had got the shine of the white lights in his eyes so bad he couldn't see anything dimmer'n illuminated café signs, and he wa'n't lettin' rehearsals bother him at all. Hence the furrowed brow on Kreegan. Also that was why he was willin' to listen to my description of Algy's stunts.

"Huh!" says he, after I've sketched out the shootin' gallery and ridin' academy acts. "But is he the real thing?"

"Ah, say!" says I. "Would I know him if he was? Course he ain't. But he can look the part, and when it comes to puttin' up a classy Wild West performance—well, you ought to see him, that's all."

"Vy nod?" says Mandelbaum. "Maybe ve could get him cheap."

"That's so," says Kreegan. "See here, Son, when could we—"

"Right now," says I. "Here; change at 14th and jump an uptown express. We'll catch him before he leaves the academy."

It was a queer thing for me to be doin', towin' a pair of strangers up to meet Algy; but that story of his about how he'd always wanted a chance to play the real man kind of got me shinnyin' on Algy's side. Course, I knew he didn't have it in him to make good as the genuine article; but here was an openin' that seemed to fit him to the life. Actin' the cow-

boy would probably satisfy all that secret yearnin' of his; and, anyway, it would be a lot safer for him.

So, inside of half an hour Algy was goin' through his whole bag of tricks again. Did he make a hit? Why, Kreegan was tickled to death!

"Great!" says he. "He's the slickest rope handler in the business, and if we can get those stunts on the films we'll have 'The Great Train Robbery' beaten to a frazzle. How about offering him seventy-five a week?"

"Make it fifty," suggests Mandelbaum.

And, in spite of my tryin' to give Algy the holdout signal, he signs up for that on the spot. Can you blame him? He'd been drawin' down about that much a month at the Corrugated.

"Good!" says Kreegan. "There's a check for the first week in advance. Report at ten sharp to-morrow morning. I'll hunt up Red River Bill and fire him to-night. He'll be sore, I expect; but if he comes around making any trouble, I'll have him put away."

Which last remark begins to worry me more or less, right from the start. Course, I wa'n't exactly responsible for Algy's gen'ral health; but if I'd been and let him in for a muss with this Bill party, and anything sudden should happen—well, it wouldn't be nice.

"Look here, Mr. Kreegan," says I, takin'

him one side, "just remember that my friend ain't used to bein' handled rough."

"Oh, we'll look out for him, all right," says Kreegan. "And I'm much obliged to you for putting us next. Reckon I owe you five or so as a commission for—"

"Nix," says I. "Spend it on keepin' Algy from gettin' punctured."

And the more I thought the thing over, the uneasier I got. My first move, of course, is to tell Old Hickory what had become of his private stenographer, and as soon as he found he'd got rid of him for good, he begins rememberin' Algy's good points, too. Also he has the same suspicions I do about what this Red River gent might hand to Algy if he got fussin' around.

About the third day after he calls me in and wants to know if I've heard anything from Algernon.

"Not a word," says I. "There ain't been any accounts in the papers, either."

"A case of that kind might be hushed up, though," says Mr. Ellins. "Meanwhile, there's no telling what they've done to him, he's such a helpless creature. I'll tell you, Torchy, you had better look up this moving picture firm and make some inquiries."

That was enough for me. With a chilly feelin' down the spine I starts off to find out

the worst. They had a Broadway office, and I pikes right for it. By luck I nails Kreegan just as he's comin' out of the entrance.

"Hey, you!" says I, grabbin' him by the elbow. "Is—is Algy all right?"

"Is he?" says Kreegan, rubbin' his hands enthusiastic. "Why, he's a topliner! We're tryin' to sign him up for a two years' contract."

"Then he ain't been shot or carved up by Boozy Bill yet?" says I.

"What—him?" says Kreegan. "Well, hardly! Oh, Bill came around, all right, loaded for trouble; but he hadn't much more than stated his grievance and let out a few yelps before that Algy of yours had roped him and dragged him through a creek. Yes, Sir, slam bang through four feet of muddy water, and if we'd had the picture machine trained on the scene I'd have given a thousand dollars. Bill? The last we saw of him he was headed southwest, running like a scared pup. Say, you can trust Algy. All I wish is that we could count on him for the rest of the season."

"Why, he ain't goin' to quit, is he?" says I.

"I'm afraid so," says Kreegan. "It's all Mrs. Managan's fault—Panhandle Kate, you know, who does the fancy gun shooting for us. She's a widow, and quite a looker. Used to travel with the big tent shows; but now she

owns a ranch of her own down in the long grass country, and she only does this for the fun of the thing. She took a shine to Algy that first day, and they've been getting thicker and thicker ever since. It's a match, I reckon, and as soon as we run off this set of films I expect they'll both be quitting. Your Algy will be bossing a fifty-thousand-dollar ranch by this time next month. And, say, I pity the fresh cowpuncher who picks him out for a softy. He's more or less of a man, Algy is."

What do you know, eh? Algy! Think of it! Well, wishin' and tryin' will do wonders sometimes, won't they?

CHAPTER III

TRYING A WIZARD STUNT

SAY, maybe you'll think I'm only breathin' at gusts of wind; but some of these gentle spring days I'm goin' to be discovered for the buddin' young wizard of finance that I really am, and then—well, I don't know whether they'll release the Second Vice, or dig up a new position for me. Anyway, I can almost see myself in a swing chair pushin' the button for Piddie.

And I ain't buildin' on any flossy dream, either. You ask Old Hickory Ellins for my present ratin' with the Corrugated. He'll tell you—maybe. Anyhow, it was the first time a really truly business proposition was batted up to me, and I just— Well, here's the way it was.

Things had been dull and quiet with us for near a week, with nothin' more excitin' happenin' on our floor than one of the lady typists flashin' an engagement ring, or Piddie's postin' a new set of rules, when here the other afternoon the big boss comes paddin' out of his room moppin' his neck and glarin' holes through the atmosphere.

"Anyone know where Mr. Robert is?" he demands.

Piddie didn't, and admits it nervous. Nobody else dares peep; so it was up to me.

"Ain't he out tunin' up his sixty-footer for the regatta next week?" says I.

"Huh!" growls Old Hickory. "So he is. But what of Mr. Prentice and Mr. Mallory—they yacht racing too?"

Which was where Piddie comes to the front strong with all the details about how Mr. Mallory had been sent to Baltimore to round up that transportation deal, and how Mr. Prentice had been given a week's leave to—

"That's enough!" snaps Mr. Ellins. "They're not on hand. But who in the name of the seven suffering sisters is left to transact the outside business? Who, eh? Torchy, here?"

He's facin' Piddie and witherin' him up with his sarcastic remarks, specially this last one. But it's that partic'lar dig that gets under my skin.

"Why not me?" says I.

"Eh?" says Old Hickory, whirlin' around and snappin' his heavy jaws savage.

"Ah, it ain't carryin' a trunk, is it?" says I. "But if it's an errand callin' for dome work—"

"By the great fried fritter!" he breaks in,

"I've a mind to try you, Boy! Come in here with me!"

I expect Piddie didn't get his breath for minutes after that; but I trots in on the rug and waits calm while the old man lights a fresh Corona.

"Ever hear of Marquette Smelters?" says he.

"Hundred and sixteen bid, no sales," says I, givin' him the last quotation from the tape, just as I'd seen it come off as I was watchin' for the result of the fourth inning in Chicago.

"Humph!" says he, tryin' not to seem jarred. "Perhaps you could tell me too why there were no sales; but you needn't bother. I'll tell you. The real reason is a person by the name of Dudley K. Morrison, who has the limited intelligence of a jack rabbit and the disposition of a mule. Got that far?"

"I'm right on your heels," says I.

"Wish you were on Morrison's," grumbles Old Hickory, "and could hang there until he gave us a civil answer as to whether or not he'll sell us his block of Smelters! He doesn't answer letters, and no one seems able to run him down. I must know before ten A.M. tomorrow, too. In fact, we've simply got to have those Morrison shares. Now if you have brains as brilliant as your hair, let's hear what you can produce in the way of suggestions."

"As a starter," says I, "why not offer seventeen?"

"Huh!" grunts Mr. Ellins, swinging back to his desk. "That's enough from you!" And then he has a second thought. "See here, Boy," he goes on, "I suppose I am an old fool, wasting my breath like this!"

"Yes, Sir," says I. "I mean, no, Sir."

"Stick to the first idea," says he, "only keep it to yourself. However, I'm going to start you even with the others. Robert reports that this Dudley Morrison is a middle aged bachelor who inherited this Smelter stock some fifteen years ago, and has been quite content to live on the dividends ever since. He knows nothing about business, and is more afraid of a broker than he is of the devil. He don't know whether his shares are quoted at one hundred and sixteen or forty-six, and he doesn't seem to care. Wouldn't talk to Robert about selling them, even when held up at his club. As for Prentice and Mallory, they couldn't get within speaking distance of him. But I want someone to make one last desperate effort to get at him before I give up. Anything to offer?"

"Sure," says I. "Camp on his trail, find his weak spot, and then rush him off his feet."

"Sounds good," says Old Hickory. "Go do it!"

"Eh?" says I, gaspin'.

"You volunteered," says he, "and I've told you all I know of the case. You are free to use persuasion, chloroform, or a club. I don't care a hang how you get 'em, if you bring me those shares."

"Is this for lŏve or glory?" says I.

"Neither," says he. "Half of one per cent. —doubled."

"That talks," says I. "But where do I find this—"

"How the blue belted blazes do I know where he is?" growls Old Hickory. "Get out!"

You'd think, to hear him, that he had rabies of the disposition; but, honest, he ain't half so grouchy as he thinks he is, and while I expect he didn't look for any action on my part, he was tickled inside because I'd tackled the job.

I was 'way over my head, I admit, and the more I splashed around the deeper in I got. Course, I sails right out to the 'phone book and starts to locate Dudley; but he didn't have a number. Next I hauls down the city directory, real confident. Hanged if he hadn't dodged that too! You can, you know. But I wa'n't through yet. On Mr. Robert's desk was half a dozen club annuals, and in the third list I digs up Mr. Morrison's name and address.

"Ah-ha!" says I. "Bachelors' quarters, I'll bet! Me for a look!"

Ever stand outside a strange house and wonder what bluff you're goin' to throw to get in, or what you'll say to your man if you do? It ain't any more use than lookin' at the back of next month's calendar to see what's going to happen. The only thing to do is push in and use your bean. So I marches up the steps and rings the bell.

The old boy on the door was a wise old gink, all right; one of these hard faced, sleuth eyed watchdogs, who was trained to scent out agents, and bill collectors, and old clothes merchants, and give 'em the quick run. Guess he didn't place my class; but he eyes me suspicious and hostile.

"Morrison?" says he, like he'd never heard the name before. "Dudley K. Morrison, did you say?"

"Maybe you'd like it in writin'?" says I. "Come, you ain't so new here you don't know the old tenants."

"I don't think Mr. Morrison is in," says he.

"You don't have to think," says I. "What for would he 'phone for me to come around if he wa'n't in, eh?"

"Ah! Then perhaps I'd better see," says he.

"Do," says I. "Tell him how you held me up here on the mat and put me through the third degree. That'll please him a lot."

"Of course," says he, "if you have an engagement—er— May I ask why you wanted to see—"

"Sure," says I. "I'm a horse doctor in disguise, and I'm goin' to cure him of nightmares. Say, how should I know what Mr. Morrison wants of me, except that he's in a hurry? But keep it up, Old Top; I can stand it if he can."

"H-m-m-m!" says he. "I'll call for his man to come down and show you up."

"Ah, chop it!" says I, shovin' past and startin' for the stairs. "I'll rout his man out myself. Second floor, ain't it?"

"Second, front," says he, goin' back to his chair, prob'ly thinkin' he's done his duty noble.

But I'd frisked the outer guard. The inside one was easier, in a way, and then again he wa'n't. I'd knocked twice on the door of 2A suite, and was just gettin' ready to hammer the panel, when open she comes and I finds myself bein' bowed in polite by a young colored gent. He's a classy article, all dolled up in a neat linen suit that looks real summery, and he has his thick, wavy black hair brushed back in a reg'lar Jimmy Artboy pompadour. His com-

plexion, though, is the regulation Pullman porter black; but, for all his meek way of waitin' for me to open the conversation, there's something dignified and genteel about him.

"Thanks, Rufus," says I, steppin' inside. "How about the big chief, eh?"

"Please, Suh?" he comes back, lettin' his voice slide up at the end curious.

"Please which?" says I. "Oh, you want a repeat on that, do you? Well, the main works then, the boss, Mr. Morrison—he's in, ain't he?"

"Oh, yes, Suh," says Rufus, "'e's tyking 'is barth, Suh." And, say, I'd give a dollar to get that off just the way he did; but if you can imagine hearin' a stage Englishman singsongin' it through a phonograph, you'll get somewhere near how this partic'lar brand of Cockney talk sounded.

"Rufus," says I, "are you practicin' that on me, or is it all natural?"

"Please, Suh?" says he once more, lookin' puzzled.

"Not guilty," says I. "You act too innocent to be springin' an accent like that unless it grew on you. But where did you bring it over from?"

"You wish to know where is my 'ome, Suh?" says he.

"Uh-huh," says I.

"Jamaica, Suh," says he.

"I see," says I. "Where we get our bananas and elevator boys from. All British down there, are you, black and white?"

"Oh, yes, Suh," says he, grinnin'.

"Well," says I, "I've heard some of your kind that could make English sound like a foreign language; but you've got a Lord Chumley twist on it for fair. Then I expect your real name ain't Rufus at all?"

"Eustis Zink, Suh," says he.

"Have I used the sink?" says I.

"He-hu-s-t-hi-s — Eustis; Zed-hi-hen-k— Zink," says he, a trifle ruffled.

"Clear as mud!" says I. "My fault, Eustis; but you fed it to me a little swift that first time. Now, to get back where we started: Mr. Morrison's sportin' in the tub, is he? Didn't look for me around quite so soon, eh?"

"I dare say, Suh," says he. "Was the master hexpecting you, Suh?"

"Do I look like a surprise party, Eustis?" says I. "Is this where I wait?"

"If you please, Suh," says he.

He had his manners right with him, Eustis did; dusts off a chair, runs the window shade up, and lugs over a supply of papers and magazines enough to keep me busy for a month. Then he fades into a little alcove real respect-

ful, and I hears him rattlin' a newspaper himself.

All of which was well enough; as far as it went. I was camping on the trail and I had my man located in his bathtub. This gives me a nice breathin' spell to frame up a plan for gettin' Dudley K. to see the beauty of unloadin' his Smelters on the Corrugated before the market got topheavy and tumbled. But what openin' to use that wouldn't get me chucked out on the street sudden was a sticker.

Meanwhile I could hear distant splashin' sounds that kept gettin' fainter and fainter. Then come the gurgle of the last pint of suds swirlin' down the waste pipe, and I knew Dudley must be out on the mat busy with the Turkish towel. Still no brilliant thought comes my way, and out where me and Mr. Zink waited there was no noise except now and then when Eustis turned a fresh page. Get the picture?

And, say, nothin' wears on my nerves quite so much as a silent wait like that. I got to watchin' the clock, and figurin' out how many minutes it would be before this mysterious Mr. Morrison would be out demandin' who and why. I'd allow him about ten to dress in. That got whittled down to six, then to four, and then— Well, about then Eustis lets go of the first sob.

First off I thought it might be another gur-

gle from the tub; but when the second one came I knew it filtered out from the alcove. And it sure sounded like grief. Followin' this was a couple of sniffles, kind of half smothered. Course, you might say it was nothin' to me if a darky valet saw fit to enjoy his off time blubberin'; but feelin's is feelin's, no matter who has 'em.

So I tiptoes over and peeks in. There's Eustis, with his arms spread out on the table, his head down, his shoulders heavin', and all the signs of deep woe in evidence. Havin' gone that far, I couldn't do any less than pass some cheerin' remark.

"What ho!" says I. "Tea-uhs, idle tea-uhs!"

Business of surprise by Eustis. He lifts a black face that's a perfectly good map of all the diff'rent kinds of grief you could name,—trembly under lip, loose jaw, and big brown, leaky eyes. Ever have a setter dog with a hurt paw look up at you reproachful? Something like that.

"Gee!" says I. "Whatever it was must have gone in deep. You ain't been swallowin' your haitches again, have you?"

"P-p-please, Suh?" says he, shaky and husky.

"Never mind my joshin'," says I. "What's gone wrong?"

"Oh, everything's wrong, Suh," says he. "I—I cawn't stand it any longer, Suh, I just cawn't!"

"Sudden attack, ain't it?" says I. "You seemed chirky enough a few minutes ago. What's happened since then? Found bad news from home in the paper?"

"Not rightly that, Suh," says he. "You—you wouldn't hunderstand, Suh."

"Wouldn't I, though?" says I. "Say, Eustis, for a quick and ready understander I'm a topliner; so, if it ain't anything you'd rather hide, let it come. Maybe it'll do you good. Find it in the obituary notices, did you?"

"Oh, no, Suh," says he, snufflin'; and then, takin' his arms off the paper he had spread out, "It's—it's that, Suh."

What he has there is the picture section of a Sunday edition, and the special halftone he points his finger at shows a road lined with palm trees. It's a long, white road that trails off into the distance towards some mountains, and in the foreground you could make out a lot of darky women, some leadin' funny little donkeys with baskets slung across their backs, and others balancin' round baskets on their heads. But I couldn't find anything to start the brine in my eyes.

"Well, what about it?" says I.

"That's the old Junction Road, Suh," says

Eustis. "Leads down from the mountains, Suh, into Kingston. It's market day; you can tell that from the people coming in, Suh. See, they've got yams, and papaw, and mangos in the baskets, Suh; and guinea grass for the donkeys in the panniers, Suh. That'll be taken up near Rocky Hill, Suh, just beyond the big cotton silk tree, Suh."

"Oh, ho!" says I. "And it looks some familiar to you, does it? Been out there, I guess?"

"Me, Suh?" says Eustis, swabbin' clear his eyes on his sleeve. "Why, I was born up along Junction Road, Suh, in the mountains, Suh; and many a time I've walked it too, clear into Kingston, eighteen miles, Suh, and back again before nightfall! Know it, Suh? I know every foot of it!"

"I see," says I. "But you hadn't ought to let a little thing like gettin' homesick floor you this way. Sure that's all?"

"There's Rosie, Suh," says he, droppin' his chin again.

"Always a skirt in the background, ain't there?" says I. "Does she figure in the picture?"

"No, Suh," says Eustis, clappin' his hand on his inside breast pocket.

"But you got one on you, though?" says I. "Mind my havin' a squint?"

Somehow I was curious to know just what sort of dusky queen it would take to work up such deep emotions in Eustis. He explains that it's only a tourist's snapshot someone had sent Rosie, and he drags it out reluctant.

"Well, say!" says I, holdin' it to the light. "There is some class to Rosie, all right!"

And it wa'n't all jolly, either; for, accordin' to the photo, she's a slender, graceful built young bamboo belle, with a cheerful, smilin' face. She's barefooted, and costumed mostly in a one-piece calico wrapper, and she's balancin' a big water jar jaunty on her head.

"Yes, yes!" I goes on. "She's got any of these Sixth-ave. brunettes faded when it comes to looks. Waiting for you, is she?"

"I cawn't certainly say, Suh," says Eustis. "She—she said she would, Suh."

"The plot thickens!" says I. "Who's the other entry; anyway, the one you last heard of?"

"There was that Foster man," says Eustis. "'E's lately got on the constabulary force, Suh—a policeman, Suh."

"Hard luck!" says I. "On the ground and sportin' brass buttons! Do they get their coppers up like we do ours?"

"Oh, no, Suh," says he. "White coats, Suh; white sun helmets, with a big brass shield

in front, Suh; wide stripes on the trousers; quite grand, Suh."

"I'm sorry to say it," says I; "but I can see this Foster person just throwin' his chest out and scatterin' heartaches all along Junction Road. Eustis, how was it you ever figured on giving the gate to a winner like that? What's your long suit?"

Mr. Zink, he shrugs his shoulders doleful. "Constables get very small pay, Suh, a few shillings a week. And Rosie would not like the city. She is a country girl, Suh. I am of the country too. First I worked in the big hotels; then I became a valet, Suh. But not for all the time. I save what I get, Suh—tips, all that, and perhaps some day I can buy a small plantation out Wag Water River way, Suh. I have one in mind, Suh; nice cottage, Suh, bamboo, and plastered sides, with good thatch on the roof. Behind there is a big mango tree, Suh, and cocoanuts, five, six, seven. On one side grows a royal palm, Suh, forty, fifty, feet high. Climbing over the door is a bougainvillea vine, purple blossoms all the year; very fine, Suh. There will be ten acres, Suh, all good for bananas, cocoa, or yams. An acre bears many pounds, Suh, out on Wag Water, if you plant it right; many pounds every year, Suh. Rosie would like it out in the Blue Mountains, Suh."

"Does sound more or less fascinatin'," says I. "But ain't the work hard? Strikes me you've got quite a snap here?"

"Bah!" says Eustis. "I am sick to death of it! Really, Suh! And Mr. Morrison—such a gentleman, Suh!"

"Eh?" says I. "A rounder, is he? Come in late and rough house you, does he?"

Eustis almost smiles at that. "Oh, no, Suh; lives like a turtle in his shell, Suh. Look you, Suh! I give 'im 'is coffee at ten, then he 'as 'is barth and shaves, and 'is ride in the park, Suh. 'E's away at 'is club until three; then 'e 'as 'is nap, Suh, and 'is barth again, which 'e's at now, Suh. 'E'll go out at seven, and be in prompt at twelve, Suh, and asleep by 'alf after. Day after day, Suh! It comes cruel 'ard on me, Suh, standing the beastly climate and 'aving no change, Suh, and always stewing about the rooms, Suh. 'E's as fussy about 'imself as an old woman, Suh. One would almost think Mr. Morrison would sicken of it all a bit, Suh."

"By Jove! he does, though, he does!" drawls out a deep voice behind us.

Course, I knew it must be Dudley K., standin' there in his bathrobe with kind of an amused look flickerin' in his dull gray eyes. He ain't young, and he ain't old, and he'd never be accused of bein' handsome. His hair is streaked up some, and he looks bored and life-

less, and he has a bulgy nose, and one shoulder's higher'n the other. There's no telling how long he's been listening.

"Go on," says he. "Let's hear the rest."

"I'm not caring, Suh," says Eustis, facin' him bold. "I'm through with it all—fussing with you, Suh, getting your blooming barth just right, and all the rest. I'm through with this beastly, dusty hole of a city. I want to get back to the palms, and the old white Junction Road, and the Blue Mountains."

"And Rosie?" puts in Morrison, still smilin' weary.

Eustis shrugs his shoulders. "I might rent an acre or two with what I've got now," says he. "Anyway, it would be living."

"Good point," says Morrison. "Why haven't you mentioned this before, Zink? Rather an attractive picture you draw of your native island. And do you think that money invested in land down there would pay?"

"Why not, Suh?" says Eustis. "You should see the way things grow, Suh!"

"Um-m-m-m!" says Morrison, his chin in one hand. "I suppose you could show me how to run a plantation of that sort?"

"Oh, would you give me a chance, Suh?" says Eustis eager.

"Might knock together a bungalow fit to live in, I've no doubt," goes on Morrison,

thinkin' out loud. "It would give me something to do, at least. Guess that's what I need, after all. I've been meaning to try the Tropics too, and— Well, we'll talk it over. Meanwhile, Zink," and he turns to me, "who might this young man be?"

"Please, Suh, I don't know, Suh," says Eustis.

"Well?" says Morrison.

But I'd got my clew at last. "Me?" says I. "Why, I'm the next leaf on the pad."

"Indeed!" says he. "Then this must be a red letter day."

"Say, you win," says I. "I picked you for a dead one; but, honest, you're a live wire."

Gets a good humored motion in Morrison's mouth corners, that does. "Thank you," says he. "But why am I indebted to you for—"

"Your lucky day," says I. "See? You're liable to be wantin' to hike out for Jamaica to give that plantation stunt a whirl. In that case you're likely to cash in them Smelter shares, eh?"

"By George! But I was just puzzling over that," says he.

"Don't!" says I. "The Corrugated will fix that for you. There's a card. We'll let you unload on us. Bother? Why, gettin' a quarter changed into nickels at a picture arcade won't be in it. Come around in the morn-

ing and—no, suppose I call for you about eleven A.M. in a taxi and tow you over for a talk with our president, Mr. Ellins? It'll be all the same if you do or don't. How about it?"

Did I land him? Why, say, between me showin' him how easy it was, and Eustis pumpin' him full of descriptions about wavin' palms and blue mountains and white roads, I almost had to hold him back. And it wa'n't ten minutes from the time I leads him in until he's closed the deal and is out shakin' hands and biddin' me good-by. Later on Eustis drifts around to assure me that, with him bossin' a big banana plantation, wearin' a wide brimmed hat, and ridin' a horse of his own, that cheap Foster person won't be anywhere in sight. So altogether that afternoon's work scored some.

"Son," says Old Hickory, as he shoves across the table that whackin' big commission check, "I'm not asking how you did it, for it seems too all fired prompt and weird to have been strictly according to Hoyle; but if you can keep out of jail long enough you have a great future before you."

"That's what I'm diggin' in my toes to overtake," says I.

CHAPTER IV

UNDER WAY WITH UNCLE ROD

Course, all kinds drifts up to the brass gate, and my specialty is to get their numbers between ten ticks of the clock, and either pass 'em through or start 'em on their way out again. Gen'rally I can do it too, without feelin' their bumps or readin' their palms; but now and then I have one slipped over on me.

For instance, there was Rodney. All I can say is that four-thirty of a sizzlin' afternoon wa'n't any time to slide in a guessin' contest like him. I was standin' at ease, as you might say; that is, I had my heels up on the desk and my head leaned back against the spring water cooler, with one eye on the clock and the other watchin' one of the lady typists sneak out a powder puff and renew the scenic effect on the sides of her nose.

Then all of a sudden I glances over my shoulder, to find this tall party in the white flannels and sun helmet strayin' in sort of hesitatin' and bashful. No wonder I gawped; for under the helmet was a set of cinnamon tinted whiskers that was the real thing. No Vandyke

"'GREETINGS!' SAYS I. 'WHAT'S THE NEWS FROM TIMBUCTU?'" *Page* 59.

UNIV. OF WIOH.

mind you: just bristly face underbrush chopped square off two or three inches from the chin and thick on the sides, like the crop had been started early durin' a wet spring. Somehow, the combination struck me as odd, and I expect I must have unreefed a grin. That seems to brace his nerve a bit; for as he tiptoes up to the rail a smile comes to view in the midst of the alfalfa.

"Greetings!" says I. "What news from Timbuktu?"

"Ah—er—I beg pardon?" says he.

"Barber shop in the arcade, main floor," says I. "Or was you scoutin' out a horse clipper?"

"Why," says he, "I'm looking for—er—This is the Corrugated Trust, isn't it?"

"Good guess!" says I. "Then what?"

"Would it be possible for me to see Mr. Robert Ellins?" says he.

Now as a rule an openin' like that would have earned him the quick shunt; but somehow I had a hunch that it might be just as well to kid him along.

"Depends," says I. "What's the name?"

"Blake," says he, and at that I let my heels slide off on the floor.

"Not T. Rodney?" says I.

"Quite so," says he, smilin' again.

"Gee!" says I, jumpin' up and swingin'

the gate wide. "Why didn't you say so first off? Come right in, Mr. Blake. You see, Mr. Robert's been expectin' you; but he's just stepped out. Maybe I can catch him on the 'phone. Walk right in."

"I—I think I'd rather wait here," says he, backin' off and glancin' nervous at our battery of lady typists that was mostly starin' goggle eyed at him.

Skirt shy? Why, he had about the worst case I ever saw! So I rustles out a chair, plants him where he'll be well screened from the Kitty-Mauds, and starts callin' up the clubs. The New York Yacht was my second guess, and it was a winner.

"Eh?" says Mr. Robert. "Rodney Blake? Good! Send him right up, Torchy."

"Trust me," says I.

But Rodney wa'n't so easy to start in any given direction. "Yacht club?" says he. "I'm afraid I don't know where it is. You see, I've been away from New York so long, and the city has changed so much, that I feel almost like a stranger. If there was anyone you could send, now?"

"Why," says I, takin' another look at the whiskers and helmet, "I expect I might do it myself. Come on."

But I must say I felt some easier after he's suggested a taxi and we're well loaded into

one. There was less chance of our headin' a rubberneck procession.

"Been out in the bush somewhere, ain't you, Mr. Blake?" says I.

"China," says he. Then I remembered hearin' Mr. Robert say how he'd been layin' out new railroad lines for the Chink Gover'ment over there; which had something to do, I suspect, with his arrival bein' so much of an event at the Corrugated.

He might be a shark at railroadin'; but he sure was some shy of information about New York. Didn't know the Fifth Avenue Hotel had gone, asked if the Metropolitan Buildin' was the new city hall, and owned up he hadn't dared tackle the Subway yet.

"What you need, then," says I, "is a guide."

"Just what I was thinking myself," says he. "I wonder if—well, wait until I see Bob Ellins."

And not until he's had a half-hour session with Mr. Robert, leavin' me waitin' by request in the taxi with the clock goin', did I get wise to what he meant. They comes out arm in arm, and Mr. Robert tips me the cheery wink.

"Torchy," says he, "Mr. Blake seems to think no one could be of more help to him in renewing his acquaintance with New York than

yourself. He would like your company for a day or so. What do you say?"

"With or without?" says I.

"Eh?" says Mr. Robert.

"The explorer's lid," says I.

"Oh, I will get a straw hat at once," says Rodney.

"Then it's a go," says I. "Better hop in, too; for you got two-thirty rung up on you already."

Rodney, though, didn't seem to mind expense; for he has a few more questions to ask Mr. Robert, mostly about people that's been laid away or forgotten. Just as he's climbin' in he remarks sort of casual, "Oh, by the way, Bob; that—er—Mrs. Heatherwood? Do you ever hear anything of—"

"Do I?" says Mr. Robert. "Why, she's our leading lady dramatist! Only she's Mrs. Heatherwood-Knight now, you know."

"Oh!" says Rodney, kind of choky. "Married again, of course."

"Young grand opera tenor, I believe," says Mr. Robert. "That affair lasted about a month. Then she got a decree. Since then she's devoted herself to remaining single, keeping herself in the public eye, and growing more stunning every year. Used to know the Widow Beautiful, didn't you? You must look her up."

"No, no!" almost gasps Rodney. "I—I don't wish to meet her, you know. And—and you mustn't arrange anything of the kind. Really, you mustn't, Bob!"

"Oh, all right," says Mr. Robert, "I'll behave. And anything you want to know or see, ask Torchy. So long, old chap."

Well, say, after I'd steered him around to a hatstore and got him to shelve the helmet for a split sennit, it wa'n't so bad towin' Rodney around. I discovers he ain't half such a prune as he looks. Along about seven o'clock he mentions dinner, and as it's a case of lookin' for big eats I steers him into one of the new lobster palaces. At first he was inclined to look skittish when a bunch of flossy fluffs plants themselves at the next table; but when he finds nobody wants to steal him he calms down and goes on orderin' expensive food reckless.

"Odd, isn't it," he remarks, when we'd got as far as peach Melba and ice cream, "how completely one can drop out of things? A dozen years ago in a place like this I should have seen a lot of familiar faces; while tonight I suppose there isn't a soul here whom I've ever known."

"There's a certain party at the third table left," says I, "that means to know you next time, I guess, by the way she's been stretchin' her neck."

"What's that?" says he, almost droppin' his spoon. "Where?"

"You can get her in the wall mirror best," says I. "See, the willowy stunner with the big pink plume on the white hat and the pearl ropes hangin' from her neck? She's gettin' up now and— S-s-s-sh! You win! She's makin' for you. Ah, there's no duckin' now, Mr. Blake —here she comes!"

I don't know whether he thought of hidin' under the table or takin' a dive into the goldfish pool, but just then he turns and gets a glimpse of her smile, and his panicky look changes to about the mushiest expression I ever saw any whiskered party work up.

"Well, well! Rodney!" says she, holdin' out both hands. "So it is really you, after all?"

"Why, howdy do, Mrs. Heatherwood—er—ah—" stammers Rodney.

"Why not Mabel?" says the lady, tappin' him coy with her lorgnette. "And for goodness' sake don't stare so! Do ask me to sit down and have my coffee with you and your young friend. Thank you. Just as much of a stick as ever, aren't you, Rodney? Now, I should have thought that all those years abroad would have limbered you up some; but you're just the same."

"These are new," says Rodney, strokin' his whiskers and laughin' nervous.

"Then they aren't tied on with a string?" says she. "I've been dying to ask. And why do you wear them? You lost a wager, perhaps, or made a vow?"

"Bronchial trouble," says Rodney. "The Manchurian winters were rather trying."

"But you're not there now, and it isn't winter," suggests the lady. "Why stick to them?"

"Why not?" says he. "What's the difference?"

"Old oddity!" says she. "You were always doing the strangest things. Your running off to China just before my second marriage—now, whatever sent you off like that?"

"You, Mabel," says Rodney. He has his elbows on the table, his chin in his hands, and he's gazin' at her like she was a jar of straw-b'ry jam on the top shelf.

Comin' out slow and solemn, the way it did, that answer seems to fuss her up some. She almost shows a color through the drugstore complexion.

"You remarkable fellow!" says she. "Really? What a theatrical thing to do! Why, I didn't dream so much genuine, old-fashioned sentimentality still existed. I

shouldn't dare use anything like that in one of my plays, you know."

"I suppose I am old fashioned," says Rodney; "but I've been away. I haven't kept track. And—er—I'm told, Mabel, that there isn't a Number Three—yet."

"Nor ever will be," says she. "Victor Knight cured me. To be sure, I don't say that all men are so weak and vain,—there wouldn't be enough vanity to go around if you were all opera singers,—but I have learned to despise the lot of you. I am teaching my girls to do the same."

"I was almost forgetting the children," says Rodney.

"When I encouraged them to call you Unky Rod! Ungrateful person!" says Mabel.

"I wish I could see them," says Rodney; "although I suppose by this time they are—"

"Don't suppose anything of the sort," breaks in Mrs. Heatherwood-Knight. "They're still little girls, dear little babies. Would you truly care to see them, though?"

"Very much indeed," says Rodney.

"Then you shall," says she, clappin' her hands. "In fact, I believe you're Heaven sent. Here I've been worrying myself mad to know whom I could send up to be with them for the next few days, while I fight it out with the stage manager about the setting of that

second act. You see, my dear old Rod, they're up at my Narragansett Bay cottage, having a ripping time, and I do loathe dragging them back to town with me in this weather. You'll go up, eh, and be Unky Rod to them again, until I can get away? Then we'll have a nice visit, and be sentimental for a whole week end. What do you say? "

And Rodney, he takes the hand she reaches across and lugs it up to his whiskers like he was bein' presented at court. " I am yours to command, always," says he.

" Why, Rodney! " says she, glancin' around foolish at a gawpin' waiter. " Oh, you're almost too good to be true! But I'm going to send you off to my darling babies this very night. You're just the one."

Course, that works me out of my cinch job; but the twenty Rodney slips me as I backs out graceful more'n made up for any fun I might have missed, and I wishes him luck.

So it was me showin' up reg'lar at the office next mornin', and when I explains the case to Mr. Robert he chuckles, " So China didn't cure him of that, eh? Poor Rod! "

" Huh! " says I. " He seemed to be enjoyin' the agony."

" He always did," says Mr. Robert. " But he'll be blue enough by the time he turns up here again."

Prophesyin', though, ain't Mr. Robert's strong suit. What happens was somethin' along a diff'rent line; for two days later he comes out to me, with a telegram.

"Torchy," says he, "our friend Rodney seems to be in some sort of trouble up there."

"Kids pullin' his whiskers too hard?" says I.

"He doesn't state," says Mr. Robert; "but he calls for help. And what do you suppose he suggests?"

"Wants you to go up?" says I.

"No, you," says he. "'Send up that red headed youth if you can possibly spare him,' is what he says. But I shall leave this entirely to you. Care to go, eh?"

"The Brodie fam'ly's a big one," says I. "I'll take a chance."

Talk about bridge jumpin', though! Say, I didn't stop to think what a blindfold proposition this was until I was on the train. I lands up there in the quahaug-stew belt about four-thirty P.M., and finds Rodney waitin' for me at the station with a carriage.

"Thanks awfully for coming," says he. "It was something I couldn't ask Bob to do, and I could think of no one else."

"Kid's ain't got smallpox, have they?" says I.

"No such luck!" says Rodney, sort of gloomy.

I looks him over surprised, and notices the lovely cerise color on his brow and nose and the sun blisters on his wrists.

"Looks like you'd been sunnin' yourself some," says I. "Been out playin' games with the darlin's, eh?"

"Playing fool would be nearer the mark," growls Rodney. "The darlings, as you call them, happen to be sixteen and eighteen, and—and—well, I've been trying to chaperon them, and it's worn me out."

"Eh?" says I, snickerin'. "You've been chaperonin'!"

"I know!" he groans. "No one sees the absurdity of my position more clearly. But I thought—well, they were only little tots when I knew them. And now— But I can't describe them. It's a type new to me, absolutely new."

"Lively pair, are they?" says I.

Rodney throws up his hands. "I don't know," says he. "I thought you might. You belong to the same generation. I don't. But tell me, is it quite proper for girls nowadays to run about all day and half the night with strange young men,—sailing, bathing, dancing, hammocking? Is it right?"

"Search me," says I. "Where and when

has something to do with it, I guess. Been actin' up real kittenish, have they?"

"It struck me as scandalous, nothing less," says Rodney. "Of course, I couldn't forbid these youths coming around; but I thought it my duty to be present when the girls had company. I've never been a chaperon before; but I'm sure that's what they used to do. So I went with them. And it's been a siege,—all one day on a yacht sailed by a pair of rattle headed youngsters who tried to see how near capsizing they could come. I was seasick, and scared, and blistered in the sun; but that night they kept me up until two A.M. at a dance. Next day it was motorboating,—more sun, more daredevil risks, then another dance. I'm used up, finished. They had me out at the tennis courts all day, and this evening, I believe, two of their young admirers are to call on Dot and Dimple. I can't go to bed and leave them. Someone must stay up around for the sake of propriety; so I—I—well, can't you help me out?"

"Me?" says I. "Say, I'd make a hot chaperon, wouldn't I?"

"But I should give them to understand that I had delegated my authority to you. And really I'm done up," says Rodney, pleadin'. "Only take my place for this evening, while I get a little rest."

"Oh, well," says I, "I expect I could kind of loaf around, if that's all."

"Thank you, thank you!" says he. "And if they try chaffing, or are rude to you, as I regret to say they have been to me at times, why, simply—"

"Huh!" says I. "The fresh things! Say, Mr. Blake, don't you worry about me. If they hurt my feelin's too bad I'll just cry into my hat and not let on. This is the ranch, is it?"

We'd pulled up in front of a cunnin' little cottage perched up on some rocks overlookin' the water. It had good, generous verandas, with plenty of hammocks and swings and easy chairs; but nobody's in sight.

"Dot and Dimple must be taking a nap," sighs Rodney, "preparing for the evening campaign. I wish I could!"

They appears at dinner, though, and while they don't say much they looks me over thorough and curious. Course, that's natural enough, specially as Uncle Rodney was explainin' delicate how, in a way, I was goin' to sub for him to-night. Nice and innocent enough lookin' girls they was too, and costumed in the regulation summer girl uniforms,—white middie blouses, hobble skirts, canvas pumps, and broad pink willie ribbons over their ears. But I didn't enjoy the silent, impish way they eyed me, nor the looks they swapped.

Yes, I'll admit I was some nervous before dinner was over, and when Rodney pikes right off to hit the feathers, leavin' me holdin' the lid down all alone, I begun to get chilly below the ankles. Of all the fool propositions I ever had unloaded on me, this was a little the rummiest. But I'd passed my word, and there was nothin' left to do but stick around.

I was inside when the comp'ny arrived; but I got a glimpse of the young chaps under the porch light, and I sized 'em up right off for the regulation prep school cutups; the kind that wears white silk socks and subsists chiefly on a diet of cork tipped cigarettes.

For half an hour or so I lays low, until I heard the chains of the porch swings creakin', and then I braces myself to do picket duty. The moon was well up by this time, and, though it was some dusky on the veranda, I makes out the whole bunch of 'em crowded into one porch swing. So I starts that way to do the casual march past.

With that the chatterin' and whisperin' stops sudden, and not a remark is made until I'm within a dozen feet of them. Then they cuts loose with, "Tar-r-rum! Tar-r-rum! Tar-r-rum—tum—tump! All hail the chap-er-on!"

It's fairly good teamwork, and the effect on me was some jarrin'. I stops and grins sort of foolish.

"Oh, isn't he cute, Dot?" observes Dimple to Sister.

"Yes, and such cheerful hair!" says Dot.

"Hee-hee! Haw-haw!" comes from the young chaps.

"Only fahncy!" says Dot. "We're being chaperoned!"

More roars of merriment from the prep school delegates. And me? Well, I just stood and took it, that's all. Maybe my ears was burnin' some; but I leans back careless against the rail and lets 'em enjoy themselves.

"And I suppose we mustn't do anything Muhmah wouldn't approve of?" remarks Dimple.

"Tee-hee!" explodes Dot, nudgin' with each elbow. Then I hears her whisper. "Come on, Boys. One, two, three—now!" and at the signal they all go to the fond clinch,—boys' arms around the girls' waists, girls with theirs around the boys' necks, a reg'lar double Romeo and Juliet act, while the next number on the program is to start singin' the chorus of one of them gummy ragtime songs:

> Cuddle up beside me, Deary,
> Hold my hand awhile;
> For I could learn to love you,
> When you smile, smile, smile!

But I'd held in about as long as I could. "Fine!" says I. "Say, no wonder you made

Uncle Rodney seasick! But I guess he hadn't come home from Coney on the last boat as many times as I have. Got anything more up your sleeves? If you have, let it come."

"Go away, Fellow," pipes up one of the boys. "Don't you see we're busy?"

"Ah, a few low-gear remarks from Percy!" says I. "Are those your callin' manners, Son?"

"Pooh!" says Dot. "Don't mind him."

"But I want a lock of his hair for a souvenir," says Dimple.

"I'll get you one if he doesn't clear out soon," says Percy.

"Honest?" says I. "Well, you wait right there a minute and maybe I'll hand it to you. Just a minute, now!"

With that I hops over the rail, grabs a garden hose I'd seen coiled up neat and handy, turns the wheel, and scrambles back just as the water comes on full force. Does Percy get it? Slam in the face. The girls scream and jump, and Master Percy opens his mouth to howl.

"Ug-ug-guggle-guggle!" observes Percy, dancin' around wild and splutterin'.

Then Harold tries a rush in, and he gets it too.

"You will buck up against a perfectly good chaperon, will you?" says I. "Such nice lads,

too! Eh? Another souse for you, Percy? Still got that cuddly feelin', have you? Well, this ought to cure it. Ain't you ashamed, shockin' the neighbors that way? Got enough? Well, see you don't drip on the veranda as you leave, and be sure to tell Mother it rained hard where you were this evenin'. Don't forget!"

Peeved? Oh, sure! And I expect if there hadn't been ladies present they might have mussed me up some; but with Dot and Dimple standin' one side and near doubled up with glee, and me handlin' the hose so accurate, the poor boys didn't have any show. They just beat it, that's all, and I'll bet they left damp streaks for a mile.

I'd done all the chaperonin', though, that I cared to deliver at one time, and I woke up Rodney and told him so flat. We talked it over for an hour, and ended by agreein' that anybody who started out to train Dot and Dimple had got to have more authority than either of us could muster.

"And, by Jove!" says Rodney emphatic, "I wish I had it!"

"Well, there's only one way I know of to get it," says I.

"Eh?" says Rodney.

"By stepfatherin' 'em," says I.

"Oh, really, really!" he protests.

"But you'd have to saw off them allspice

tinted whiskers before you had the ghost of a show," says I. "It might be worth tryin', though."

"By George!" says Rodney, after thinkin' that over for awhile. "I wonder—"

Then we turned in, and as there was an early mornin' message from Mrs. Heatherwood sayin' she'd arrive on the noon train, I has an eight o'clock breakfast and Rodney drives me in to catch the nine-fifteen back to town.

And, say,—you wouldn't of thought it of him, would you?—but less'n a week later, as Mr. Robert swings in through the gate one mornin', he stops and grins sociable.

"Well, I hear your friend Blake has gone and done it," says he. "Married yesterday."

"Honest?" says I. "Then that was him I saw sneakin' into the barber's as the train pulled out. But, say, I know a pair of sweet young things that's billed to be broken of the Juliet clinch habit before the season's over. Rodney's a little slow on the getaway; but he means business when he once gets started, believe me!"

CHAPTER V

SHOWING TEEDY THE DITCH

Just to watch the diff'rent kinds of folks knockin' around sort of blind and casual, the good ones gettin' let in wrong, and the crooked ones pullin' down the extra dividends, and both sides actin' like they was grouched at bein' here at all—well, you'd most think life was only a punk scheme run without sense or system.

And yet, somehow or other, we all seem to fit in; even me and Doc White and J. Chubb Teedy.

Doc he was about the biggest surprise package I've had sprung on me since the last full moon. Course, I'd seen him hangin' around the office for near a week; for he put in two whole days waitin' for Mr. Robert until he fin'lly lands him.

He's a tall, wiry gent, kind of youngish and fresh cheeked, with mild gray eyes, and mild ways, and a quiet, bashful smile, and he's about the most patient waiter I'd ever seen holdin' down one of our reception room chairs.

Just what his line was I had to pass up:

but I locates his section as soon as he makes that remark about hangin' his rain coat on the rail, for he pronounces coat like it didn't have an A in it—something like cut, short and snappy—which tags him as hailin' from up in the b'gosh belt.

"Hayin' all done?" says I, just to make him feel at home.

"Mine was," says he, "sometime ago. I notice you still have quite a crop to cut."

"Good work!" says I, givin' back the grin and pattin' down the head thatch he's eyin' humorous. "They do send out an occasional live wire from Skowhegan, don't they?"

"Bangor, too," says he.

"My, my!" says I. "It's a shame more of them verdant villages don't show on the map, they've got such cute names. Bangor! I must remember that one."

"Hope you'll not strain anything in the effort," says he, his gray eyes twinklin'.

Say, me and him swapped quite some airy persiflage durin' odd times, him on one side of the brass gate and me on the other, and we got more or less chummy.

"Who is that person?" inquires Mr. Piddie suspicious.

"Delegate from the State of Maine," says I, "come on special to get your job, Piddie."

Honest, I was dead sure he was trailin' some-

thing of the kind, but when Mr. Robert comes out with him after the interview and shakes him by the mitt so cordial as he leaves, I saw I had the wrong number.

"Hired a new department head, or what?" says I, noddin' towards the elevator.

And, bein' in a chatty mood, Mr. Robert gives me a few details.

Seems my pink cheeked friend was Professor Taylor White, A.M., P.M., and a lot more, and that the proper hail to give him was Doc. He'd been in the same class with Mr. Robert at college, only he hadn't run with quite the same set; for, while Mr. Robert had been trainin' for the crew, and doin' the fraternity act, and staggerin' Old Hickory with his expense accounts, Whity had been managin' an eatin' club, and collectin' for a steam laundry, and coppin' out scholarships to pay his term bills with. So they hadn't mixed much, and it's no wonder Mr. Robert didn't recognize the name first off.

"But he's a remarkable chap," says Mr. Robert.

"Back in Bangor?" says I.

No, it wa'n't in the canned corn and sardine district that Professor White had cut his initials deepest. He'd gone back to the pines for awhile as a rock and mineral expert in one of them rutabaga colleges, and then all of a sud-

den he'd chucked his job and beat it over to Africa.

He'd been readin' minin' reports, and he'd run across an item about how they'd lost track of the Barnato streak. Near as I could make out, it was a case of some big gold mine that had fizzled out unexpected, and the various minin' sharks that had been called in couldn't agree on whether the streak had just petered out, or had dipped to the right or left or straight down.

Anyway, Whity gets interested, studies the reports and diagrams that was printed, and works out a theory of his own as to what had become of the lost vein. Never'd seen a gold mine in his life, mind you; but he takes a chance on hikin' off there all on his own hook. And when he gets on the ground, and finds this ledge of rock stickin' straight up in the air half a mile away, and compares it with the stuff from the original streak, he announces that he's solved the mystery.

He's right there with the action too, and while it was some hard to convince a lot of English experts that a pay streak could run up as well as down, he hammered it into a few of 'em so hard that they put up the coin, bought the mine, and set up some drills on the ledge for test borings. Then come the guyin' from the old minin' engineers, and the discovery

that it was goin' to cost a lot more than he'd figured, and his bunch of backers begun gettin' cold feet.

At that stage Whity decides that the only way to keep things goin' was to hustle back to New York and put the scheme up to someone who was a real sport. And Mr. Robert was the one he picked. Take a flyer? Why, if he was fallin' off the Singer Buildin', Mr. Robert would bet you on how many times he'd bounce! He takes over control of the stock by cable, puts five or ten thou. on the wire to keep the drills goin', and forgets it durin' lunch hour.

Accordin' to his own schedule, Professor Taylor White should have been hikin' back to boss the job; but he misses first one steamer and then another, until it comes out he's gone and got mushy on a young lady he'd met comin' over from Liverpool. I accumulated them details by careless rubberin' at the 'phone desk one afternoon, and, by the way he describes her to Mr. Robert, Doc must have had his nerve with him; for she's an English swell, the Hon. Miss Greaves, who's come over with Mrs. Brooks Linn for a peek at New York society.

"Mrs. Brooks Linn!" says Mr. Robert. "Why, then the young lady must be quite all right. Know her? Certainly. Everyone knows Mrs. Brooks Linn, and she's an eccentric old tartar."

"Gee!" thinks I. "For a quiet party the Doc sure is a high looker."

It ain't more'n a couple of days later, though, that Whity has another long chin with Mr. Robert, and comes out lookin' sort of worried.

"Bosh!" Mr. Robert was sayin'. "Why, of course you must go. You'll not be expected to perform, and you can watch for a chance to have your chat with Miss Greaves. You'll need a frock coat, you know, and a few other things. Oh, certainly you can do it."

And knowin' Whity's hist'ry, I could piece out the rest. He was up against one of Mrs. Brooks Linn's oolong handouts, and the prospects of buttin' into society with only a Bangor trainin' was sendin' shivers down his spine. But, unless he wanted to scratch his entry in the Fair Lady Handicap, it had to be done. Also it was now or never.

With his finger on the down button, Mr. Robert calls back to me, "Oh, I say, Torchy! If a Cape Town cable should come in before closing time you'd best bring it up. There's the address—and ask for me."

It's one of Mrs. Brooks Linn's at home cards he scales through the door, and I gets Piddie fussed to the fins by flashin' it casual and remarkin' how kind the dear old soul was to remember me. I wa'n't lookin' for the mes-

sage to show up at all; but blamed if a Postal kid don't drift in about half past four and chuck it on my desk.

"Excuse me for rattin' before the whistle blows, Piddie," says I, grabbin' my cap; "but I expect Mrs. Brooks Linn is wonderin' why I'm so late."

She's one of the old Knickerbocker set, you know, that still sticks to lower Fifth-ave. even if the cloak and suit factories are gettin' thick around her, and the old colored butler that holds me up at the top of the brownstone steps looks as though he might belong to a Double Tom and Hounds Company.

"Yes, I know, Uncle," says I, "maybe I don't look like I took lemon with two lumps reg'lar; but here's the card, and if you'll show me in where I can have a word with Mr. Robert Ellins I'll soon be on my way again."

Lucky it wa'n't a crush, or I might have drifted around them big parlors for an hour; but there wa'n't more'n a couple of dozen people on hand, and Mr. Robert and his friend Whity looms up conspicuous near the first set of double doors. They was lookin' sort of bored too, and Mr. Robert heaves a sigh of relief when he sees me with the envelope.

"Hello. Here's a good excuse," says he, taking the message. "Let's see what they say.

Eh? Here, old man, listen to this! 'Good colors at ninety-foot level. Send White over at once.' Well, old man, it looks as though you were a winner."

"Over there, yes," says he, as cool as you please; "but here—well, I suppose I might as well quit. My esteemed rival still seems to be holding the floor."

"It's his specialty," says Mr. Robert. "If there was only someone who could take a little of the wind out of— By George!" he breaks off short, and then whispers eager, "What do you say to trying Torchy against him?"

"But—but how?" says the professor, lookin' puzzled. "And would it do?"

"I'll shoulder all consequences," says Mr. Robert. "Here, come on up to the cloakroom. Young Tubbman's just gone up. We'll levy on him. This way, Torchy."

And before I can get my breath we're up in a front chamber listenin' to Mr. Robert explain to a languid, light haired young gent that his frock coat and white tie are needed bad for an emergency case that he'll be told all about later on—and wouldn't he smoke a cigarette or two meanwhile? Tubby would, with pleasure, and inside of two minutes we've changed rigs and I'm bein' hustled down stairs again.

"But what's the dope?" says I. "What are my lines?"

"Just act natural, that's all," says Mr. Robert. "No time to tell you more. Here we are. Ah! Mrs. Brooks Linn, I've taken the liberty of bringing in a young business associate who has just brought me some important news. May I present Mr. Torchy?"

As a matter of fact, it didn't make much diff'rence what he said; for the old girl wa'n't payin' attention, and before he's half through she sticks out a pudgy hand covered with marquise rings and mumbles something about bein' tickled to death to see me. One of these huge, triple chinned old parties, Mrs. Brooks Linn is, and the way she's sittin' bolstered up in that big chair fannin' herself with a dinky little feather affair reminds me of a trick elephant in skirts.

Next I'm made acquainted with the real queen of the party, the Hon. Miss Greaves. With a handle like that to her name I was expectin' a tall, haughty beaut, all neck and waist, like you see in the coronation pictures; but it was a bad guess. She's one of these cute, cuddly little fairies, with big, forget-me-not blue eyes, and a lot of silky gold hair knotted loose at the back. She's dressed as simple as if she was costumed for a milkmaid act, and when she shakes hands and says she's glad to know me I'd been willin' to take oath she meant every word of it. Think of loadin' a sweet young thing like

that down with "Honorable," as if she was a bloomin' Congressman! Ain't that English, though?

I couldn't blame Doc White a bit for wantin' to stay on the same side of the Atlantic with her, and I don't know but I'd taken a chance on exchangin' some tea party chat with her myself if there'd been an openin'. But there wa'n't. The center of the stage and everybody's attention was bein' occupied just then by a round faced, rolypoly young gent who was doin' funny stunts at the piano. He was standin' up to it sort of careless, ticklin' the tumpytum stuff out of the keys in the most surprisin' ways, usin' his elbows, knees, and even his nose, and windin' up by whirlin' around and sittin' slam down on the north end with a grand crash. But you know them parlor entertainers. Only this one was real shifty at it, and he takes the big applause he gets with a bored air that was almost convincin'.

"Isn't Chubb just too killing!" I hears Mrs. Brooks Linn puff out.

I'd just been handed a cup of tea by a young lady floater and was trying to balance a lettuce sandwich on the edge of the saucer, when Mr. Robert jumps to the front and leads up the star performer. He introduces him as Mr. J. Chubb Teedy.

"Ah!" says Mr. Teedy, winkin' roguish at

the audience. "Charmed, I'm sure. And pardon me, but what cheerful hair!"

Course, I wa'n't lookin' for any familiar josh at that stage of the game; so I only grins sort of foolish and tries to back into a corner. Seemed to encourage Teedy, them bashful motions of mine, and he follows on.

"Do you know," says he, "I'm horribly curious about little things. Now tell me; do you stir your tea with your right or your left hand?"

There's no gettin' away from J. Chubb's voice, either. It's one of these brassy, high pitched society voices that drowns out everything else, and I could see everybody stoppin' to listen and look. Now, I was feelin' sheepish enough in that long skirted coat, without havin' the limelight turned on me in that fashion; but I manages to admit that I gener'lly uses my right hand.

"Just fancy!" pipes up Teedy. "Now, I prefer a spoon."

There's a roar over that musty one, and I tints up like an autumn leaf. After that I near chokes takin' a hasty swallow of the tea stuff, and gives a pretty punk exhibition. Right in the midst of it, though, I catches my breath, gets a strangle hold on the panicky emotions, and sends back a grin.

"Spoon, eh?" says I. "Now, I'd thought a nursin' bottle might be more your style."

"Eh?" says Chubby boy, whirlin' around a little jarred. "Precocious repartee, as I live! What say, good friends, shall we test the mettle of this Knight of the Fiery Locks?"

"Oh, do, do!" chimes in three or four at once, and fat old Mrs. Brooks Linn beams approvi

Ju[illegible] little byplay gives me a map of the situa[illegible] They'd been lookin' for a goat, and I was [illegible] As for J. Chubb Teedy, he is one of these all star combinations who always figures on havin' the spotlight to himself. He counts on bein' played for the drawin' room favorite against the field, and I could see where a quiet chap like Doc White, or even a slow mover like Mr. Robert, would have to play thinkin' parts while he was around. Course, I didn't know how Mr. Robert would like it if I should cut loose with the unpolished jibe; but the chesty ways of this Teedy party was rapidly gettin' on my nerves.

"Such a charming little fellow, too!" he observes, turkeyin' around and examinin' me curious. "Perhaps he can sing for us?"

"Never a sing," says I.

"But surely," he goes on, "with so much brilliance on top, you must do something for our amusement. Come, now!"

"I might recite your favorite poem," I suggests.

"Hear, hear!" says Teedy. "Order in the court! Our young friend will now recite my favorite poem. Go!"

"It's short," says I, "and it runs like this:

"I like its gentle gurgle,
I love its fluent flow:
I like to wind my mouth up—
And I love to hear it go!"

Two titters and a giggle, and I suspect them got out because it came so unexpected. The rest was gasps. I didn't dare look Mr. Robert's way for fear I'd get the shut off signal; so I just watched the changin' expression on J. Chubb's face. The jab got through his skin, all right; but he pretends to yawn and then applauds vigorous.

"Truly subtle, indeed!" says he. "What a gift to be able to memorize these jokebook things!"

"How rough of you, Teedy!" says I. "Right on the wrist that way!"

"I suppose that's something clever, too," says he, sneerin'; "but I fear I don't get it."

"Oh, yes, you do," says I. "It's there—stuck in the oatmeal."

Then it was Teedy's turn to work up a color.

"Really," says he, swingin' on his heel, "I'm not up on vaudeville dialogue, you know."

But I wa'n't goin' to let him squeal that way. "What, goin' so soon?" says I. "Who's that with you?"

Teedy couldn't help givin' a quick glance around, and then he has to bite his lip to keep back the peevish reply. Don't think, though, I was carryin' the crowd with me. Most of the women was eyin' me slantwise, and old lady Brooks Linn was fairly glarin'.

How was I to know that Chubby boy was her pet nephew, and that she'd been showin' off his cunnin' tricks ever since he was knee high? I got posted on that afterwards, also as to her plans for him and Miss Greaves.

So for the time bein' I slipped quiet into the background while a soothin' committee of six females gathered around Mr. Teedy and finally succeeded in leadin' him back to the piano, where there wa'n't any competition. And I must say his imitation of a country band comin' home from a firemen's muster was some comic stunt.

This starts him off on imitations, and he was gettin' curtain calls reg'lar, when Mrs. Brooks Linn's trained nurse comes in to cart her off for her daily dinner nap. It's a fixed event on the program, I understand; but the old girl says nobody must mind her leavin', and orders every-

body to stay and listen to Chubb. So the party don't break up; but the interruption gives me a chance to sidle over to Mr. Robert and Doc White.

"Too fresh, was I?" says I. "Well, I didn't plan on givin' it to him so raw; but—"

"I was pained, Torchy, deeply pained," says Mr. Robert, winkin' facetious; "but I expect to recover. Meanwhile, should you have another opportunity, you may—er—forget that I am here. Teedy, you know, is all right in his way; but he's a trifle too persistent."

"Oh!" says I. "You wouldn't care then, if he was ditched?"

"The term hadn't occurred to me," says Mr. Robert; "but if— Hello, what is he up to now?"

Teedy had just finished impersonatin' Napoleon on the Rock, and after whisperin' somethin' that set his circle of admirers off into a spasm of snickers he begins manipulatin' with a linen table scarf and some sofa pillows. I didn't tumble to his act until he plants himself in the old girl's big easy chair and starts paddin' himself out.

"Too bad Aunty's missin' this turn," says I. "I wonder if she couldn't be brought down for it?"

"By Jove!" says Mr. Robert. "If we could only manage it!"

"Why not?" says I. "Lemme have a stab."

With that I slips out, beats it upstairs, and meets the nurse just closin' a door soft.

"Asleep yet, is she?" says I.

"The madame?" says she. "No, no. We've hardly begun to undo—what is it?"

"It—it's Mr. Teedy!" I pants out.

"Her nephew!" says she. "Why, what is the matter? Has—has anything serious happened?"

"Can't say yet," says I, "only they're all standin' around him and—well, all I know is he don't look quite himself."

"Heavens!" gasps the nurse, makin' a rush through the door she'd just closed so easy.

Course it was all well enough for Mr. Robert to stand back and sick me on; but when it comes to heavyweight old girls with a jaw like Mrs. Brooks Linn, I'd rather debate at long range. So I slips along to the cloakroom, makes a quick change with the obligin' Tubbman, and beats her to the lower hall.

I wa'n't any too quick; for right on my heels comes Aunty, puffin' like a steam derrick and bein' helped along by the nurse and two maids. I gives her the right of way; but follows in far enough to see if the show is still on. It was. Teedy is makin' the hit of his life, and the way he lolls back in that big chair, and rolls his eyes,

and simpers, and uses a little fan, was a dead ringer for the old girl. Anyway, he had the crowd shriekin', and he was enjoyin' himself to the limit, until all of a sudden he looks over their heads and sees her standin' between the draperies glarin' at him.

The finish? Say, you don't suppose, when I've touched off the fuse myself, I'm batty enough to hang around while the blast goes off? By the time she opened up on him I must have been a block away.

But it worked like a charm. Mr. Robert reports next day that inside of ten minutes Aunty had disinherited Chubby boy three times, fainted twice, and been lugged off to her room with the nurse holdin' smellin' salts to her nose. Also it appears that Doc White stays through the excitement, and grabs the first chance he's had in two weeks for towin' the Hon. Miss Greaves into the conservatory and whisperin' a few remarks in her ear. Must have been right to the point too; for the latest bulletin from him is that it's all settled.

"Rough on Teedy, though," says I, "losin' out on both girl and will at one strike."

"You needn't worry about that," says Mr. Robert. "He and Aunty made it all up yesterday. As a matter of fact, she can't get along without him."

"Sort of a livin' comic supplement for her,

is he?" says I. "Well, that's one kind of a job, ain't it?"

And, as I was sayin', somehow or other we all seem to fit into the scheme. So there must be some system to it, after all.

CHAPTER VI

SCORING UP ONE FOR TOOTS BOY

ANYWAY, there's worse things in the world than red-headity, even when it runs into such a bonfire tint as mine.

"Look out, Torchy!" says one of the humorists on our office staff. "You'll be using a celluloid comb by mistake one of these days, and then—bang!—you'll come down here next morning with a head like a peeled onion."

"It'll do to go with that cabbage you wear a hat on, won't it?" says I.

"Don't be grouchy," says he. "We know you didn't pick out that color as a matter of personal choice."

"Ah, you're jealous!" says I. "If I thought there was danger of anybody imitatin' that shade, I'd have it copyrighted."

And, honest, I wouldn't know how to get along without my red hair. See the fun it brings in and the folks it gets me acquainted with! Three out of five strangers, after they've had their first glimpse of me, will turn away and grin. The others don't turn away. And me, I grin back. Why not?

It was comin' down in a scrubway train not long ago that my ruddy thatch makes its star hit, though. I must have had my cap off, lettin' some of that non-dividend producin' Interborough atmosphere blow through my locks, when I hears a cooin' little voice over my shoulder going "O-o-o-ou!" and I turns around to see a cute three-year-old standin' up on the next seat to me, with his eyes popped out and a chubby forefinger pointin' straight at my topknot.

"'Ook, Mummer! See!" says he.

About the same time Mother does look, discovers what Kiddie is up to, and grows red in the cheeks. She's one of these neat, modest dressed, delicate tinted, pleasant faced young women, that acts like she usually took things calm and easy. But this stunt of the youngster's in tryin' to advertise my still alarm seems to get her some fussed.

"Why, Kirby!" says she, removin' the accusin' finger firm but gentle, and throwin' me a smile carryin' a truckload of assorted apologies.

Master Kirby, though, can't get over his excitement all in a minute. He wants to make sure Mother has done justice to the subject. So he remarks once more, this time pipin' up strong, and loud, "See, Mummer, see! Pinky pink!"

"No, no," says I; "reddy red. And watch

out or it'll burny burn. See? Z-t-t-t-t!" and with that I wets one finger and goes through the motions.

Course, that gets a laugh out of him; one of these clear, hearty, ripplin' kid laughs that does you good to hear.

"Do again! Do again!" is the way he calls for an encore; so I repeats the performance. With that second laugh we has everybody in our end of the car lettin' the reefs out of their mouth corners.

"More, more!" demands the kid.

"Why, Kirby!" says Mother, protestin' sort of mild.

"It's your turn," says I. "You try it."

And Kirby he wets one finger generous and sticks it out.

"Z-t-t-t-t!" says I, at which Kirby laughs so hard he settles back into Mummer's lap good and solid.

We kept up the game too, from 42d down to 14th, and the more he did it the funnier it seemed to get. Course, I admit it wouldn't have been so humorous from some kids; but this one has such a way of lookin' at you out of them big, round, brown eyes, and his cheeks are so chubby and pink, that I guess most anything he could do would have seemed cute. You know the kind. And Mother acted so calm and sensible about it, not pretendin' to fuss or tryin'

to spoil the fun when she saw I didn't mind, that I rides two stations beyond where I should have got off, just for the sake of amusin' little Kirby. I helps him across Broadway too, and was goin' to beat it back to the office then, but he still has a grip on my finger and don't want to let go.

"Tum," says he. "We go home. You tum too."

"Well, I guess I can go a ways," says I.

"You nice mans," says he. "Nice mans."

"Thanks," says I. "You're more or less popular with me yourself. What's your name, eh?"

"Tirby 'Ooker De Mott," he comes back quick as a flash.

"Well, that's some name, all right," says I.

"Daddy tall me Toots Boy," says he.

"Toots Boy, eh?" says I. "Now, that's more like. Can I call you Toots Boy too?"

"You tan," says he. "What's 'oo name?"

"Me?" says I. "Why, I'm Torchy," which seems to amuse Mother a lot.

And by the time I'd found they lived on the same street that I do we begun to get better acquainted. Toots Boy had made me promise to come in sometime and see his "wind-up bear 'at can hop dance," and I've made a date to take him for a Sunday mornin' walk.

Funny, ain't it, how you'll pick up new peo-

ple that way, and how soon you get to know all about 'em? Course, with a ready converser like Toots around, fam'ly secrets would have had a poor show. But the De Motts didn't seem to have any they wanted to keep under cover. They was just as classy and refined young folks as you could dig up anywhere on Fifth-ave.; but here they was livin' on the top floor of one of these old-time, no elevator, railroad flat houses, a whole block west of the society belt, skirmishin' along cheap, and makin' no bones of it.

They had me guessin' some at first, specially after I'd got to know Mr. De Mott; for he's a fine lookin', clean cut young chap, who can put over the polite English as smooth and natural as any of Mr. Robert's swell friends. I don't mean the "Aw, chaamed to meetchu!" gush that Piddie gets off to strangers; but the real article, with all the G's and D's sounded, and the accents placed just right. The way he carries his chin up, and looks you level between the eyes when he talks, went with the rest of it too.

But blamed if he wa'n't still wearin' a summer suit, and the overcoat he sports is one of them out of date paddocks that got the hook three or four seasons back. Seems that Mrs. De Mott is her own cook too, and that when Daddy's home he's chief dishwiper. He had

his coat off and was hard at it first time I went up there to get little Kirby; but he only laughs and keeps right on polishin' off the blue crockery.

I'd sized him up as holdin' down a twenty-five-dollar a week job with some insurance company or brokers' firm; but later on it comes out that he's his own boss. Seems he's in with a friend of his who's a minin' engineer and has figured out a patent ore car that they're tryin' to get orders for, havin' as a side line the downtown agency for a new gas mantle that pays their office rent and leaves 'em something to live on.

Nothing very allurin' about them prospects; but the De Motts seemed to be takin' it cheerful. Anyway, it would been hard workin' up much gloom with Toots Boy around; for he's just so many pounds of condensed sunshine. First off he has to show Daddy how my hair goes "Z-t-t-t-t!" when you touch your finger to it.

"Pinky pink!" he chuckles.

"All right," says I. "Let it go as pink; but you're either jollyin', or else you're color blind. Now all aboard for our walky walk."

It was a lively promenade we had, Toots Boy and me; with him toddlin' along holdin' onto my hand, askin' questions as fast as he could get 'em out, and fillin' in any gaps with chunks

of information about Daddy and Mummer and the wind-up bear. Wish I could remember some of them choice bits; but there was too many of 'em.

Besides, what I want to get to is last Saturday afternoon. I'd been tellin' Zenobia and Martha, the prize pair of old ladies that I live with, all about Toots, and I'd planned to show him off to them. So as soon as quittin' time comes I fades from the Corrugated Trust's gen'ral office, leavin' the brass gate wide open, and chases around to the top flat after little Kirby. It don't take long for Mother to button on his leggin's and coat, in spite of his dancin' up and down and announcin', "See gol' fisses, Mummer! Torchy take me see gol' fisses!"

"Sure," says I. "Swimmin' around in a glass tank. And a little turtle, too, right in the front window."

You see, Aunt Martha's goldfish had been the bait I'd held out, and he'd jumped at it eager. Maybe he don't look some cute too, in that reefer of his, and his little cap that don't half cover up all the brown curls, and them big eyes just sparklin' with fun and good nature! Honest, I was most as proud of exhibitin' Kirby as if he'd been some relation of my own.

So when I gets to the house and sees who it is Aunt Martha's entertainin' in the sittin' room, I'm some sore. It's Miss Agnes, which

means that Zenobia has either beat it, or shut herself in somewhere up stairs. That don't sound much like Zenobia, either; for she's an easy tempered old girl and a good sport who gen'rally takes things as they come. But this niece of hers and Martha's is the one party who seems to get on her nerves.

I'll admit she'd get on mine too; for, while she's a swell looker, and wears her clothes like a thoroughbred, she always struck me as a mighty frosty proposition.

That ain't just because of the row she raised at the time she heard of my being taken in, either. There's something about the cuttin' way she says things, and the sharp edge she gets on her voice, that rubs me the wrong way. Also there ain't anything friendly in her manner in lookin' you over. Besides that, she gen'rally has a headache just comin' on, or just passin' off, and as a rule she's all worked up over some awfully mean thing that's been done to her by one of her most intimate friends.

Oh, I've heard Agnes discussed often enough to know her from the ground up; for Aunt Martha thinks she's just about right, and Zenobia holds diff'rent views.

"The poor child!" Martha would sigh after one of her visits.

"Let's see," says Zenobia,—"Agnes is

twenty-six, isn't she? That's what I call an old maid."

"But surely, Zenobia," comes back Martha, "you wouldn't blame her for—"

"I would, and I do!" says Zenobia decided. "At sixteen she was a lovely and somewhat charming girl, only beginning to be spoiled. At nineteen she was a beauty, with her whole family, a big circle of friends, and goodness knows how many nice young men anxious to let her use them as doormats. Result: a selfish, ill natured, thoroughly spoiled young person. It's a national custom, I know; but that doesn't make it less silly."

"I'm sure Agnes seems to be just as popular as ever," protests Martha.

"Meaning that she is always on the go,—dinners, dances, bridge, theater parties, and so on. I know," says Zenobia. "That kind of popularity is easily kept up; but it isn't cheap. You pay the price. Agnes is paying now. This last breakdown of hers was nerves, wasn't it? No wonder!"

"I suppose you would have a brilliant girl like that bury herself in the suburbs, with three or four crying children to bring up?" says Martha.

"That would be exactly my advice," says Zenobia. "She'd have something worth doing then, and she wouldn't be growing into an acid

dispositioned society old maid. She has had her chances, three of them to my knowledge."

"But all three engagements she broke herself, you know," says Martha.

"Because she wouldn't give up any of her fun," says Zenobia. "It costs three thousand a year to keep Agnes going, and not one of those young men could afford that. She knew it, and they knew it. Bah! I've no patience with such girls! And there are thousands like her, I presume. Thank goodness there are plenty of the other kind too, so the race keeps on!"

Course, when it comes to an argument, Aunt Martha ain't one-two-sixteen with Zenobia, who always has plenty of facts and language to back up her opinions. And while I never took much notice of the fine points of the debate, I was strong for the gen'ral proposition that Agnes was just a limedrop done up in a fancy package.

So, instead of announcin' with a whoop that I'd brought in Toots Boy, I smuggles him into the front room, plants him alongside the goldfish tank, and goes scoutin' back to see if I can find Zenobia anywhere. There was no dodgin' Agnes, though. She spots me as I'm gumshoein' down the hallway and holds me up with, "I say, who is that?"

"Me," says I, stickin' my head in the door.

"Oh, you!" says Agnes, sort of sniffin'

"Uh-huh," says I, lookin' past her to Martha. "I've got the youngster in the other room."

"What youngster?" demands Agnes.

So Martha has to explain that it's a little boy from down the block that I've got acquainted with.

"How perfectly absurd!" says Agnes. "Bringing strange children in from the street!"

"Excuse me," says I, "but this one come straight from home."

"Yes, and no knowing what disease germs he may bring with him!" says Agnes. "That's the way the Coulter children contracted diphtheria, you know, Aunt Martha. You shouldn't allow it."

"Mercy!" squeals Martha. "Are you sure he hasn't diphtheria, Torchy?"

"Say," says I, "you just take a squint at him, and if you think little Kirby looks like—"

"Kirby!" breaks in Agnes. "Kirby who?"

"Why, Kirby Hooker De Mott, Junior," says I.

"What!" says she, sittin' up straight and changin' color.

"Maybe you'd like to hear him say it?" says I.

"No, no!" says she. "I don't want to see

the child. But tell me, do you know his—his father?"

"Sure thing," says I. "And he's all right, too."

"Do you think, Agnes," says Aunt Martha, "it can be the young Mr. De Mott whom you—"

"Oh, I've not the least doubt; the three names, you know," says Agnes. "So he's married, is he?" and she gives a hard little laugh that's about as merry as breakin' a pane of glass.

"Married?" says I. "Well, I guess you'd think so to see him with an apron on, helpin' Mrs. De Mott around the flat! He sure looks some domestic then."

"And what is she like—Mrs. De Mott?" says Agnes.

"She's a corker, Mrs. De Mott is," says I. "Not one of your hobble skirt queens, of course; but the kind that shows up as well in a dustin' cap as she would in a Paris lid, if she had one. And, say, she can build a dumplin' beefstew that's a dream!"

"Really!" says Agnes, archin' them curved eyebrows of hers a little more. "Perhaps you know her first name?"

"Lucy," says I.

Agnes bites her lip some at that, and as Aunt Martha is lookin' over inquirin' she remarks.

"The youngest Whittmore girl; you remember, they came from somewhere near Boston. Kirby knew them while he was at college. So Kirby lives in a flat and his wife does her own housework? Ha, ha! Doesn't that sound odd, Aunt Martha?"

"But you knew, Agnes," says Martha, "that his father left almost nothing."

"Oh, yes, I knew," says Agnes. "I believe he told me something of the sort one night when— Well, never mind now. I wonder, though, if Kirby can wipe dishes as well as he used to lead the cotillion?"

"He ain't any slouch at the dishwipin' game, anyway," says I.

"I hope that isn't his whole occupation," says Agnes, smilin' sarcastic at Martha. "Do you know if he does anything else?"

"Well," says I, "he sells gas mantles in the downtown district."

"A peddler?" says Agnes.

"Not much!" says I. "He's outside agent. But, say, maybe he won't always be doin' that, either. Wait until him and his partner get in some orders for their new ore cars. It's a long shot, I expect; but some day it may land him right."

"How thrilling!" says Agnes. "Meanwhile he helps with the dishes. You see, Aunt Martha, what I missed. I'm sure I couldn't even

help make a beefstew. And as for waiting years and years for some patent to—"

"Maybe it won't be so many years," says I. "I've steered him up against Mr. Ellins of the Corrugated Trust, and if he can get our firm to place an order he'll be on Easy Street."

"And then," says Agnes, "I suppose Mrs. De Mott will have a maid, and perhaps move into a larger flat? How gorgeous! Perhaps too there will be a nurse for little Kirby and—"

"I'm tummin'! I'm tummin'!" pipes a little voice full of laughs. "I made fisses go wound and wound!" and in rushes Toots Boy, all excited, with his cheeks like a flower shop window, and his round eyes just dancin'. "Oh," says he, stoppin' in front of Agnes and sizin' her up admirin'. "Pitty, pitty!"

And Agnes, she sits there starin' at little Kirby like she was seein' a ghost.

"I like 'oo," he remarks. And then, holdin' out both hands and springin' one of them winnin' smiles of his, he demands, "'Oo takes up Toots Boy? Yes?"

She tries to look somewhere else, first at Aunt Martha, and then at the door; but it's no use. There stands Toots Boy right in front of her, with his arms out coaxin', and that admirin' look on his face.

Agnes turns white and then red, and seems

to be tryin' to swallow something. But all of a sudden she reaches out and grabs him up. Toots Boy knows what to do then, all right. He puts his arms right around her neck and gives her a reg'lar bear hug, just like he gives Mummer, or anyone else that's nice.

Does that get Agnes? Say, it would have melted icicles off'm an iron lamp post! And after he's let her cuddle him a minute, he just naturally takes her by one hand, and Aunt Martha by the other, and tows 'em into the front room to see how he can make the "fisses go wound and wound" after his pink finger.

"You darling!" says Agnes, givin' him a final hug when the half-hour is up and I starts to take him back to the flat.

We'd got only about ten doors down when I discovers that one of Kirby's woolen gloves is missin'; so we trails back as far as our front steps and I leaves him there while I skips in after it.

That's how I come to bust into the sittin' room without warnin' and find Agnes face down on the big couch sobbin' away to beat the band, and dampenin' a perfectly good sofa pillow most reckless. Now what's my cue in a case like that? I didn't have the answer, and, as there's the missin' glove on the floor, I picks it up and backs out without sayin' a word.

At the flat I finds Mr. De Mott, with a beamin'

face and his arm around Mrs. De Mott in a reg'lar lovers' clinch.

"Torchy," he shouts, hammerin' me on the back with his free hand, "you're a brick! The Corrugated will take our cars. Hurrah!"

But, say, what I can't quite figure out yet is just why Agnes did the weep act. Can you?

CHAPTER VII

A BOOST FOR THE BENOS

Must have been my day for standin' at the receivin' end of the hard luck wire. First off it was Izzy Budheimer, givin' me a long earache of how his cousin Ike was tryin' to overbid him on that cloakroom snap of his; then it was Miss Smickett, our crack lady typist, who unloads a tale of boardin' house woe; and lastly comes Mr. Piddie, grouchin' away because there was a block in the tube and he was half an hour late gettin' over from Jersey.

And all this on a bright, snappy mornin', with a sky as clear as a plate glass show window, and the air tastin' like imported ginger ale.

"Ah, ditch it!" says I to Piddie. "You commuters ought to feel thankful to be let into New York at all."

And I thought when I made a dash for the Dairy Lunch three minutes before the noon whistle blew that I'd shunted all them doleful confidences for an hour at least. Just as I'm gettin' in line for the pie counter, though, I gets a glimpse of a tall, slim young gent who's sidlin' up to the coffee urn and pullin' a tin pail

sort of sheepish out of a paper bag. So I takes another look, and of course, the minute I spots them deep set, blue eyes and the lengthy, serious face, I has him located.

"Well, well!" says I, steppin' over to where he's waitin' his turn. "And how's Skimp Farrell these days?"

Jars him almost as bad as if I'd jabbed him with a pin. He whirls around nervous, and then when he sees who it is he sighs sort of relieved.

"Oh, it's you, eh, Torchy?" says he.

"Uh-huh," says I. "But why the deep deception with the Mocha growler? What's the game?"

"That's right, rub it in!" says Skimp. "Think I'm doing this to show off? Hardly, Son, hardly. But, if you must know, pilot bread and coffee in the room are a heap better than parading Broadway with that gnawing feeling under your vest. A quart, please, and plenty of milk. Eight lumps will do."

"Tut, tut!" says I. "And you the only real actor I got on my list! But I thought since you jumped the newspaper game and landed on the big vaudeville circuit you was a sure winner."

"Looked so at the start, didn't it?" says Skimp. "But you can't keep on with one act forever, and I couldn't get another sketch that

would fit as snug. First season I've missed out on some sort of booking, though; but I'm sure up against it this time."

"Not really, Skimp?" says I.

"Look at this," says he, holdin' up the corner of a rusty black frock coat and disclosin' a near satin linin' worn to ribbons. "Last piece in the costume trunk. Got any cigarette papers to spare? I still have half a bag of alfalfa."

"I can do better'n that, if you'll meet me at six-thirty to-night," says I. "I'll stand for the big eats and feel proud of it."

"Welcome words!" says Skimp, chokin' up husky and pattin' me friendly. "Torchy, that's the first genuine call to free food I've heard in two months, and I've never listened harder. Thanks, Son, deep thanks, and if ever the time comes when you—"

"Ah, turn a rule on that!" says I. "Suppose I've forgot them press seats you used to slip me when we was on the Sunday edition together? Not a chance! And if you'll bring your appetite to the corner of—"

"No, no!" breaks in Skimp. "I'd like to; but it must not be. Can't go back on the rest of the firm, you know."

"Eh?" says I. "How big an aggregation is it, anyway?"

And as I walks across the square with Skimp,

shieldin' the coffee between us, he gives a sketch of the situation. Seems he's one of the Brothers Beno, that does a burlesque jugglin' act, with acrobatics on the side. There's three of 'em all told, and only one is an original Beno, Skimp havin' been signed on when little Al Beno gave up early last spring and took his cough out to Denver. They did well enough in the summer snap circuit, makin' fair money at open air resort houses; but when it come to gettin' indoor dates for the winter there was nothin' doin'. You know how good a jugglin' act has to be to get a hand nowadays, and I judge theirs must have been more or less punk, with their hobo makeups and their back number lines.

"We did have one offer," says Skimp, "to fill in between the pictures; but Beno shied at it and we curled the lip of scorn. Od Zooks! if it would only come again! For one, I'd be glad to play for a film machine: anything to get off this pilot bread and coffee diet. Well, here's my corner."

"Then this is where I look for you and your friends at half after six?" says I.

"But see here, Son," protests Skimp. "I can't stack up a trio of bottomless pits against a pay envelope the size of yours."

"Pooh, pooh!" says I. "Likewise tush! Why, Skimp, just the extra coin I rake in is enough to sag my pockets. Besides, I know a

fifty-cent table d'hôte where the spaghetti l'Italienne alone is a sure cure for famine. Anyway, I'll be here waitin'."

"I surrender," says Skimp. "You'll find us forming a hollow square."

But the climax of the day comes when Mr. Robert tries to switch Bertie Billings and his glooms off onto me that same afternoon. Nice boy, Bertie, if you don't scratch him too deep,—one of the fair haired, pink cheeked kind, who thinks shredded thoughts and devotes his whole soul to the job of makin' good in the younger set.

Near as I can make out, Bertie's chief aim in life is to be picked to lead a swell cotillion sometime and wipe out the smear on the fam'ly escutcheon caused by the bad breaks made by Pa and Maw Billings when they moved east from Milwaukee and tried to butt in on the strength of their brewery stock and the new marble bathroom.

Bertie's been well parlor broke, though, and he's been comin' on slow but sure, now that Pa and Maw have faded into the background. But there's more or less competition, even in the line he's picked out, and it's only now and then he figures in the social notes. He belongs to some good clubs, though, and he lets Mr. Robert do him often at billiards, and occasion'ly they stroll back to the office together after lunch.

This was one of Bertie's days, and as they're about to part at the brass gate he seems to be makin' some sort of an appeal for help.

"But I cawn't think of a single thing," he's sayin', "and I've simply got to go Reggie one better, you know!"

"Let's see," says Mr. Robert, "what was Reggie's great masterpiece?"

"Trout in a pool," says Bertie. "Had it sunk in the table, and the guests caught their own fish—souvenir fishing rods, and all that. Rippin' scheme, bah Jove! Wish I'd thought of it first, y'know."

"Why not have a duck pond, then," suggests Mr. Robert, "and let your guests shoot their own game during the soup course—souvenir shotguns, too?"

"But, I say, Bob," chimes in Bertie eager, "do you think— Oh, come, now! It couldn't be done. Don't chaff, old man. This is serious, y'know. There's a monkey dinner, but that's been done, and a girl in a pie. Oh, I say, cawn't you tell me a new one? I'm floored, absolutely floored!" And with that Bertie groans like he was in real pain.

"Sorry," says Mr. Robert, "but I haven't an idea. You might ask Torchy here, though."

Bertie, he takes one glance at me, and then gives another groan. "Don't be a brute, Bob!" says he.

"Why," says Mr. Robert, "Torchy is our emergency man. Isn't that so, Torchy?"

"Sure!" says I, grinnin' back. "Idea expert and brain reserve for the whole shop, also frettin' done for fussy folks."

Bertie boy ain't in a mood for bein' joshed, though, and he pouts real pettish.

"There, there!" says Mr. Robert. "If I hadn't a directors' meeting on hand I should see what I could do, Bertie. But you've heard Torchy describe himself: why not call his bluff?"

"My rates for dinner ideas are twenty a throw," says I.

"Twenty!" says Bertie. "I'd give fifty."

"Done!" says Mr. Robert, and then he turns to me. "Now, young man, there's a commission for you. Come around at ten in the morning, Bertie, and Torchy will tell you all about it. So long, old chap, and don't worry," and at that Mr. Robert hustles into his private office, leavin' me and Bertie starin' at each other with our mouths open. He was takin' it mighty serious. Bertie was too, which seems to me a lot like goin' far to find trouble. But I can be real cheerin' when I try hard.

"Whoops, m' dear!" says I.

"Eh!" says Bertie.

"Ah, don't you know the answer to that?" says I. "Say, 'I'm a daffodil.' All of which

means, Mr. Billings, that you're to chirk up."

"I—I don't in the least understand," says Bertie.

"All right; deep coises, then," says I; "but be sure and sound the K soft, as in scissors, and when you cross Madison Square don't get lost in the woods."

Honest, it was almost a shame to waste good kiddin' on a nonresister like Bertie; but I had to pass on something to pay for what Mr. Robert had handed me.

Then I got to thinkin' it over, and wonderin' if it was all josh. Suppose I could work up a scheme good enough to connect me with that fifty? Ever try exercisin' your mind on a fool problem like that? Well, it ain't such a cinch as it seems, and inside of an hour I was almost sympathizin' with Bertie. Then comes Mr. Robert, as he leaves for the day, shovin' it at me once more.

"Remember," says he, "that we are relying on you to plan that dinner entertainment."

And I knew Mr. Robert. He thought he'd slipped something humorous on me this time, and he'd be bringin' it up for a month after as a case where I'd had a chance and couldn't make good. But couldn't I? By closin' time I had the wheels goin' round at high speed, and all I could grind out was batty notions that even Bertie would have been ashamed to own.

So when it comes time for towin' the Brothers Beno out to Friccasini's I wa'n't feelin' as chesty as usual. They was waitin' on the corner, all right, and a worse mated trio I never saw bunched. The original Beno was as short and thick as Skimp Farrell was tall and slim, and twice as solemn to look at, which was sayin' a good deal. You wouldn't any more expect him to go in for athletic stunts than you'd look for a truck horse to perform well on roller skates. As for the third party, he was a medium sized gent by the name of Lavine. He had a pair of bowlegs and a face that was as near a blank as anything human I ever saw. Somehow, the combination was funny just to look at 'em in repose, and I couldn't figure how they had ever managed to miss out.

Just to keep the table chat goin' while we was samplin' the onion soup, I gets Skimp to tell me about their act.

"Why," says he, "we open in two flats, picnic scene set, and we come creeping in from the wings, firing off gags until we discover the lunch baskets. That's our cue for beginning to juggle the dishes—you know, plate twirling, and all that."

"Eh?" says I, being struck with a sudden thought. "Can you all juggle crockery?"

Skimp not only says they can, but proceeds to give a sample by spinnin' his soup plate on his

forefinger; while Mr. Lavine gathers up a few forks and knives and starts a circle over his head. They almost had the head waiter throwin' a fit when I gave 'em the stop signal.

"Enough said," says I. "What else do you hand out?"

"We give a burlesque trapeze act for a finish," says Skimp.

"Not with him?" says I, noddin' at Beno.

"Feel that," says Beno, holdin' out his right arm. The muscle felt like a brick under his coat sleeve.

"Think you could do them turns at a private dinner party without smashin' any expensive china or spoilin' any gowns?" says I.

"Would there be a stage?" asks Beno.

"Stage nothin'!" says I. "You don't get the idea. Now listen," and I proceeds to sketch out the hasty stunt I'd thought of.

Skimp and Lavine said they was ready for anything; but Beno shakes his head disapprovin'. He was afraid it wouldn't be quite a dignified thing to do, he said, and he'd hate to get mixed up in anything that would lower his professional standing.

Could you believe it? And him not able to look his landlady in the face! Honest, I had to coax him into sayin' he'd come, for the sake of the others; but he wanted it understood that this was an awful blow to his pride. He was a

bird, this owl faced Mr. Beno was; but I could see it was all genuine. He talked about his Art as serious as if he was a Frohman star, and it was lovely to hear him.

"That'll be all right, too," says I, "and think of the high class audience you're goin' to have. That ought to count for something."

"It does, indeed," says Beno. "Anyway, I will make the sacrifice this once."

Course, all I'd worked out at the time was a bare outline; but I was still hammerin' at it when I hit the feathers that night, and in the mornin' the whole scheme came out as clear as consommé.

"Well," says Mr. Robert, when he comes sailin' in about nine-thirty, "been taxing that mighty intellect of yours, eh?"

"For a little thing like that?" says I. "How foolish! Bring on your Bertie boy." Then I gives him a diagram of my plans.

"By George!" says he. "I'm inclined to think you've hit on something, after all. It's new, anyway, and it might be a success."

Was it? Say, you should have been with me behind the scenes, peekin' through the glass of one of the pantry doors. We'd sandwiched the Brothers Beno in between three reg'lar waiters, and drilled 'em so they handled the canape and oyster course without makin' a break. That was to throw the guests off their guard, and

when the trio cuts loose chuckin' the service plates around reckless, tossin' 'em across the table and so on, there was some squeals of surprise from the ladies. They squealed some more when the Benos slid in twirlin' plates of soup, and by the time they opened up jugglin' the glasses and silverware we had 'em goin'.

"Why, Bertie!" exclaims one lady. "Wherever did you find such clever waiters?"

Over the middle of the table was what looked like a big chandelier draped in buntin'; but as soon as coffee had been passed around Bertie pulls a string, disclosin' a triple trapeze, and at the same time the Brothers Beno lets out a whoop in chorus, each vaults over a chair back, and the next minute they're swingin' above the heads of the company, sheddin' their waiters' uniforms until they get down to pink tights and trunks, and then they proceed to do all kinds of dizzy stunts just as if they was behind the footlights.

Course, it wa'n't any center ring act they put over; but the surprise of seein' 'em change from plain waiters into swingin' bar artists was what got the crowd. They won more encores than they'd had for many a season, I guess, and Bertie boy was patted on the back until his shoulders must have ached.

Win out? Why, it was a scream! Mr. Robert was on a broad grin, Bertie was so tickled

he stuttered, and the Benos went back to their boardin' house steppin' high and each one clutchin' a twenty-dollar gold piece so hard it's a wonder the eagles on 'em wa'n't black in the face. As for me—well, you couldn't exactly say I hated myself.

I thought I'd done a good turn by all hands too, until I strolls down to the Corrugated next mornin' and finds the trio lined up in the lower hall waitin' for me. Skimp Farrell tries to open the proceedin's gentle; but the original Beno pushes him back and grabs me by the collar.

"See here, you young thimblerigger!" says he. "What d'ye mean by making monkeys of us like this?"

"Meaning how?" I gasps, gazin' from one to the other.

"Look at this!" growls Beno, shovin' a mornin' paper under my nose.

And, sure enough, Bertie boy had gone and got busy with the press agent stuff. There it was, a whole half-column leadin' the society news, tellin' how Mr. Bertie Billings had sprung a most delightful novelty at the younger set's dinner dance by introducin' a number of vaudeville artists disguised as waiters. The Brothers Beno was mentioned by name, too.

"Well, ain't it all good advertisin'?" says I.

"Advertising!" snorts Beno. "Here you wreck my whole professional career, and then

you ask that! Young man, I want you to understand that I've been on the boards for nearly fifteen years, and that in all that period this is the first blemish on my reputation as an artist. Now I am disgraced. Appeared as a waiter! That ends it all, that does! You—you have broken muh heart!"

At that he lets go of me, pulls out a handkerchief, and begins sobbin'. Ever seen a fat man blubber? Well, it's an awful sight. I wanted to snicker, and at the same time I felt so mean I'd have been glad to had someone kick me. Skimp don't say much; but he's caught the panic from Beno. So has Lavine. They all look mighty solemn and accusin'.

"Gee! I'm sorry," says I, and then I explains how I didn't dream of Bertie's rushin' into print with any account of this fool stunt. Nothin' I can say, though, makes 'em feel any better. They even refuses to touch the fifty I offers to hand over, and fin'lly leaves, as mournful as a funeral procession.

When I sees the same story worked up elaborate in all the evenin' papers, with pictures of Bertie and the Brothers Beno, I feels more guilty than ever. I was expectin' next a bulletin of how the trio had been found in their room with the gas turned on, or an account of some other sad end that they'd sought to hide their disgrace, and I was wonderin' what kind of

a monument the fifty would buy if I got trade discount on it; when Skimp Farrell blows in, all arrayed in a new silk lid and a new black frock coat.

"Ha! The sole survivor!" says I. "Go on! Call me assassin! But first tell me how did Beno finish himself off?"

"Finish!" says Skimp. "Why, he's out on Broadway in his new checked suit receiving the congratulations of the profession. Haven't you heard?"

"Not a word," says I. "What's it like?"

"Well," says Skimp, throwin' out his chest important, "it seems that our merit as high class entertainers has at last been recognized."

"I want to know!" says I.

"We've had the managers after us ever since noon," goes on Skimp. "Got them bidding against each other, and at two P.M. we signed up for two thousand a week, five month' contract. Got a real playwright building a sketch for us,—society scene, people at dinner, us doing the juggling waiter act, you know. Yes, Sir, fifteen people in the company, our names in colored lights over the door, and we open and close full stage."

"Well, well!" says I. "Fine work! But by the way, anything from Beno about an apology?"

"Oh, yes," says Skimp. "He wanted me to say that he accepts yours."

"He does which?" I gasps out.

"To be sure," says Skimp, "he felt rather sore this morning—all of us did—about the notoriety; but he says we can live it down, and that he bears no ill will."

"Thanks, Skimp," says I, grabbin' his mitt and pressin' it grateful. "You tell Beno for me that he's got a heart like a prize ox—and a head like a door-knob."

What's that sayin' about castin' your bread on the waters and after many days you get back a pretzel? Oh, well, Bertie thinks I'm a wonder, anyway.

CHAPTER VIII

HELPING OUT AT A SPLICE FEST

Oh, I don't know! Maybe I ain't listed reg'-lar in the Percy-Claude class; but now and then I get a chance to walk through a sidewalk canopy the long way. Yuh-huh! Quite so!

You see, we've been marryin' Marjorie off. And hist! Whether you'd dream it or not, it ain't been any little half holiday chore, such as you'd get through between bites of a sandwich. Not at all! Why, before it was all over Old Hickory has a disposition on him like a row of broken bottles, Mr. Robert has developed ridges between his eyebrows, and Piddie is on the verge of nervous prosperity.

And first off it seemed such a simple, one-two-three proposition; that is, it did after Marjorie really settled down to Ferdinand. Course, we'd had our troubles before that. Maybe you remember her Juliet splurge, when she wanted to crowd Marlowe into the back drop; and about that Schützenbund Count her and Miss Vee discovered abroad; and a few other little episodes I may have mentioned.

Not that I've made out a full list. Honest,

for a heavyweight Venus, Miss Marjorie in her before-takin' days could work up more miscellaneous tender sentiment than any of these slim, loppy queens I ever saw. Havin' been left out of a few of the fam'ly conferences, I couldn't just state how many Broadway matinée heroes, and Russian violinists, and grand opera tenors she's gone mushy on. But that was her specialty.

So, after the fam'ly got over the first shock of seein' what she'd fin'lly pasted the "Reserved" label on, they seemed to feel kind of relieved. For Ferdy ain't just what you'd describe as a dashin' hero. While you couldn't exactly place him in the shrimp class, he's some narrow-gauge for his height, wears thick, shell rimmed glasses, lisps a little when he gets excited, and is sort of inoffensive and insignificant to look at—specially when he's eclipsed by Marjorie. Say, he'll never be sunstruck so long as he keeps on the shady side of her.

But, then, they say some of these cross mated pairs often get along best, and from all I hear Ferdy is a nice, quiet, well-parlor-broken young gent, who comes from a good fam'ly and is due to inherit enough American Sugar preferred and U. S. Rubber stocks so it won't be a case of rustlin' to buy all them extra sized things Marjorie'll need from the department stores.

No, we didn't any of us really object strong

to Ferdinand, unless it was Mr. Piddie, and he seemed to take it to heart that she hadn't picked out an Earl or a Crown Prince at least. Honest, to hear him go on to some of the lady typists, you'd thought he was her pet uncle, or something.

As for Old Hickory and Mr. Robert, for awhile there they seemed real contented with the prospects.

"Yes, nothing but a quiet little home wedding," I hears Mr. Robert tellin' one of his chums. "Ferdy's idea, you know; and it suits the governor to a T."

All of which don't get me int'rested, one way or another. Course, I'd had a chance to get more or less well acquainted with Marjorie; but it hadn't got to the point where I was worried as to how she got married, or where. Never havin' been in one of these home splicin' bees, maybe my ideas was a little vague on the subject. I had sort of a dim picture of Ferdy wanderin' in casual with the minister some afternoon about teatime, findin' Marjorie there, and havin' the event run off without any more fuss.

Not until the private house wire began to warm up did I change my views. Seems there was a few odd details to be attended to, and, as Mr. Robert happened to be off for a few days on a Western trip, it was Old Hickory that was

called on to stand by. I was waitin' orders in his office one mornin' when the first cylinder head blew out. It was one of his rush days, when he had three big deals hangin' fire, a puddlers' strike on tap out at some of the works, and two fussy Wall Street men waitin' for him in the directors' room, and it wa'n't just what you'd call the psychic moment to ring him up from home.

"Hey?" he growls into the transmitter. "Have I seen the crater? What crater? Oh, caterer! Well, why the ding guzzled dollops didn't you say so at first? Say, who's this talking, anyway? Oh, Hawkins, is it? Well, see here, Hawkins, haven't you better sense than to bother me with fool questions at this time of the— Eh? Well, Mrs. Ellins should know better, that's all. You tell her I haven't seen any blasted caterer; but that if it is absolutely necessary I suppose I can. What else? Florist? Yes, yes; orange blossoms, and a shower bouquet for Marjorie, and bouquets for the bridesmaids, and— Say, what do they think I am, up there, a domestic utility bureau? No, I tell you! Haven't time to listen to any more. Not a minute!" and with that he bangs up the receiver and whirls around just quick enough to catch me with a grin on my face.

"Huh!" he snorts. "Joke, is it? Well, since you think so, suppose you get closer to it.

You take a pad and pencil, trot up to the house, and get a complete list of all their wants and wishes. Then I'll know what I have before me. I'll give you just an hour to hand in a full report.''

That was only the beginnin' of my chasin' back and forth on this simple home weddin' business; and, say, I hadn't been at it long before I revises my picture. First off, it was harder to catch Mrs. Ellins and Marjorie than as if they'd been railroad presidents. When they wa'n't out shoppin', or at the tailor's, or havin' fittin's at Madame Du Monte's, they was tryin' on hats somewhere, or else upstairs bossin' three or four dressmakers. Also the front hall and the drawin' rooms was bein' done over; so everything was upset downstairs. Then gen-'rally there was a decorator prowlin' around, sketchin' out plans for floral arches and palm screens; or the caterer plottin' where he could stow his waiters, and figurin' private whether or not he'd have the nerve to charge three plunks a head for servin' a couple of hundred people with a chicken sandwich, a biscuit Tortoni, and a glass of fizz. Then there was other people to be engaged,—the musicians, and the carriage caller, and the extra cloakroom maids, and the outside cops, and the plain clothes men to watch the presents, and— Well, say, stagin' a musical comedy or launchin' a battleship can't

have much on one of these simple home weddin's, Fifth-ave. style.

Mr. Robert gets back right in the midst of it, and is rung into engineerin' the bridesmaids' luncheon at Sherry's, and soothin' down Ferdy's nerves between times. He was gettin' the fidgets, Ferdy was, as his time got shorter and he began gettin' glimpses of what he had to go through. The strain was even tellin' on Marjorie, and, while she could afford to lose fifty or sixty pounds, it wa'n't goin' to help the fit of her white satin any.

But me—say, I was standin' it fine. Course, it was some annoyin' to be called away from business so much; but somehow them last few days I didn't mind a bit bein' sent up to the house on fool errands. You see—well, maybe I hadn't mentioned who was to be maid of honor. Uh-huh! And of course, when things got real warm, the only sensible thing for Miss Vee to do was to move right down to the scene of action and go into camp. So me and Vee—why, we chased around some together after this and that, and exchanged a little josh on the fly. All of which didn't bore me, exactly.

In fact, I was enjoyin' this weddin' business quite some; that is, I was up to the time when Cousin Teddy appeared. He was Marjorie's cousin, you know, and the day before the big splash he comes down from Yale on a special

leave. How they could spare him from the freshman class I can't imagine. Must have seemed quiet and dull up at New Haven after he left; for Cousin Teddy was some big whizz. He all but admitted it himself, and there was plenty of others who encouraged the idea,—Marjorie for one, Vee for another, and even Old Hickory seemed pleased to see him—at first.

It was only on the afternoon of the rehearsal that I discovers him. I'd been sent up by Mr. Robert to sort of help herd the boy choir into place in one corner of the lib'ry and then stand where I could see the stairs and pass along the signal for them to cut loose singin' the weddin' march.

"Oh, Teddy's attending to that," says Vee. "See, he has them all arranged."

That's right. Teddy was on the job. One of these openfaced youths with a bristly pompadour, protrudin' front teeth, and bulgy eyes, Theodore was; but he didn't allow any little blemishes like that to keep him in the background. Teddy had pushin' ways and a voice like a train announcer. Also you could tell at a glance that he was the sort of college cutup that collects barbers' poles and Chinese laundry signs, and paints his class number on statues and public buildin's.

"Now you kiddos," he was shoutin' to the

choir boys, "get a little more teamwork into this mass play! You tumbled in here last time like a bunch of fans boarding a trolley car. Try it again and see if you can keep from stepping on your own feet. Oh, rotten! Once more, my young sports. Steady on the left wing, steady! There, that's some better. I'll have you fit for a George Cohan company before we're through. Eh, what?"

"Isn't he killing?" observes Vee.

"Almost that," says I.

"Pooh!" says Vee. "You should have been here at luncheon. He just kept us in roars. What do you think he did? Pinned a napkin to the tail of the butler's coat! He's just loads of fun, Teddy is."

About then he spots me and comes over. "Oh, I say, Vee," says he, "who's your young friend with the low comedy hair? Isn't a stray from my chorus, is he?"

"This is Torchy," says she. "He's from Mr. Ellins's office, you know."

"Ah! One of the Corrugated slaves, eh?" says Teddy, lookin' me over careless. It was the sniff at the end that made me grind my teeth; for by the way young Mr. Theodore swings on his heel and strolls off it's clear he ain't dyin' to get acquainted with any of Uncle's office staff.

"What cute manners!" says I to Vee.

"Oh, you mustn't mind Teddy," says she. "One never knows what he's going to do next. But he certainly has livened things up since he came."

And, at that, it seems, he hadn't more'n begun to shake out his whole bag of tricks. Not bein' on the spot, I missed a few of his cunnin' performances durin' the rest of the afternoon and evenin'; but when I shows up at the house next day, half an hour or so before the grand affair, I soon knew he'd been busy. Only a few of the early comers were driftin' in; so I wanders back into the lib'ry, where I finds Mr. Robert and Old Hickory growlin' and lookin' sour.

"Dash it all!" Mr. Ellins was sayin'. "Can't anyone squelch that young whelp?"

"Perhaps, if we really knew what he was up to," says Mr. Robert. "But Marjorie may have only imagined it, and Ferdy is so rattled he hardly knows what he's saying, you know. Ah, here's Torchy! Well, Son, you're in demand. A certain young lady has been anxiously asking for you."

"Gee!" says I, grinnin'. "That's always the way."

A minute more and Vee leans over the banister and gives me the hurry-up signal; so I follows upstairs to the little alcove on the top landin'. Gosh! but in that pink dress and the

lace cap she was lookin' some stunnin', too! Them big eyes of hers, though, was serious.

"What's wrong?" says I. "Ferdy ain't swallowed the ring, has he?"

"It's Theodore," says she.

"Don't tell me he's run out of comic stunts!" says I.

"If only he had!" says she. "But there's such a thing as knowing when to stop. Apparently Theodore doesn't."

"Not truly?" says I. "What's his latest?"

"That's the trouble," says Vee. "We don't know what it is. He has four or five other fellows with him, and they're up to something horrid. They've stolen Ferdy's suitcase, for one thing; and we suspect they've been putting something in the punch; and now they're hiding, planning goodness knows what."

"Yes, you said he was loads of fun," says I.

"But he's carrying this altogether too far," says Vee, her eyes flashin' sparks. "Ferdinand is in no state to stand stupid practical jokes; and as for Marjorie, she declares she will never have the courage to go downstairs, never. She says she knows Teddy is going to spring something awful. And she wants to know, Torchy, if you can't find out what it is and stop him."

"Me?" says I. "Flag Cousin Teddy, the

pet of the fam'ly, in his innocent little pranks? Why, I ain't got any license to—"

"Yes, you have," insists Vee. "Mrs. Ellins is disgusted with him, and Mr. Ellins is swearing mad; but no one seems to know what to do. Oh, can't you help some way?"

"I can make a stab at it, Vee," says I; "but it's kind of short notice to get in much action. Now, if I could have the run of the house for—"

"Go anywhere, do anything you like," says she. "Mrs. Ellins says so."

"Then I'm on the trail," says I.

Well, I was willin' enough, so far as that went; but I hadn't any more idea of how to tackle the proposition than a pup would of climbin' a ladder. I knew Teddy and his crowd wouldn't be hidin' downstairs, though, and once I'd seen the billard room on the top floor; so up I goes on a chance. Wonderful dome work! I finds the door closed, with a sentry on the outside, and from the sounds that floats out I takes it that Teddy is puttin' his kids through some more practice drill.

"Most ready for the grand entrance?" says I to the sentry, a long legged, pimply faced youth in his first frock coat.

"Shouldn't wonder," says he, lookin' me over suspicious. "Are you—"

"Just strolled up to see how Teddy was com-

in' on," says I. "Goin' to spring that new dope, is he?"

And Longlegs, he fell for it first rattle out of the box. "Listen!" says he, grinnin' wide.

Well, I stepped up and stretched my ear. You know how that Meddlesome Weddin' March goes—Tump-tump-te-dee? The boy choir was singin' the tune all right; but the words was new to me. I didn't get 'em all; but the beginnin' was like this:

Here comes the bride,
Get onto her stride,
See how she wabbles
From side to side.

"How about it?" says the sentry. "Won't that score with the audience? Cost us a half for each kid; but it's going to be a hummer, eh?"

"Great!" says I. "Teddy's a wonder!"

"Wait until you see the groom's suitcase," says he. "We've painted red hearts all over it, and stuffed it full of old clothes. Hid his silk pajamas and all that truck under that big seat in the lower hall, you know. Well, say," and he winks facetious, "but won't Ferdy be wild when he gets to his hotel and opens up that collection?"

"Haw, haw!" says I, givin' a good imitation of uncontrolled mirth and slappin' Percy the

Sieve on the shoulder. "But how about the trunk?"

"You ought to see it!" says he. "Bound up with yards and yards of white ribbon, and 'Lovey Dovey's Duds' painted in big letters on each end. We pinched that early this morning and hid it in the areaway. Got a barrel of confetti balls, a bushel of rice, and about forty old shoes stowed away there, too. You know Teddy's scheme is to have us all line up in a double row and just pelt the bridal couple good and proper as they scoot for the carriage."

"With shoes and all?" says I.

"Sure thing!" says he. "Soak 'em, that's the stuff. Make 'em run the gantlet. Trust Teddy! He's been to dozens of weddings, and he knows how to work it."

"He must be mighty popular," says I. "How about the bride's suitcase, though?"

"Can't get it," says the sentry. "And we wanted to do a few things to that, too."

"Say," says I, gettin' a sudden thought, "maybe I can cop it for you."

"Could you?" says he. "Wow! That would be rich. It's the only thing Teddy's missed out on, and he—"

"Here!" I breaks in. "Soon as you fellows are through up here, meet me at the foot of the back stairs, first floor. I'll get it or bust something."

"Fine business!" says he. "They're most done now."

"Then I've got to work quick," says I. "Call it ten minutes—foot of back stairs, remember!" and with that I rushes off.

And I sure did hustle some. First I puts Mr. Robert onto the job of rescuin' Ferdy's honeymoon outfit and packin' it into a kitbag. Then I tips off Old Hickory about the new version of the Weddin' March that was to be sung, and advises him what to do.

"Will I?" says he. "I'll scare the young scoundrels stiff!"

I guess he did, too; but I couldn't stop to listen. I had to have another word with Vee, and in two minutes more she's hustled out another suitcase of Marjorie's and I'm gallopin' down into the basement with it. Three minutes of explorin' was all I had; but it was enough, and by the time I'm back to where I was to meet the cutup bunch I had the campaign all laid out.

"Got it, have you?" sings out Teddy.

"That's what," says I.

"Good work!" says he. "Where?"

"Down here," says I. "I'll show you."

"Come on, Fellows!" orders Teddy. "Hey, Flicky, bring the red paint. Quick, now!"

And they follows like I had 'em on a rope; down through the laundry and out front, where I grabs a heavy door and swings it open.

"You'll find it right in there on the coal," says I. "And have a good time with it, Boys!" with which I gives the last one a shove, bangs the door shut after him, and shoots home the bolt.

It might have been pleasant to have stopped a minute and exchanged a little repartee with Teddy and his chums through the planks; but I didn't have time just then. I had to beat it back up to the second floor and send soothin' messages to Marjorie and Ferdinand.

"Clear track!" I announces to Vee. "You tell 'em they can blaze away now, without bein' afraid of any comic horseplay durin' the ceremony, or of bein' mobbed afterwards."

"You dear!" says Vee. "But Teddy?"

"Corked up tighter'n a bottle of olives," says I. "You'd best get 'em under way, though, while the goin's good."

And, say, I expect for the kind, it was a perfectly good home weddin'. Never saw Marjorie look more like a captive balloon, though, than she did in that stiff white bridal gown and veil. You'd thought, too, when Old Hickory comes paddin' in with her on his arm, that he'd just been sentenced for life. Some of the bridesmaids was queens, all right; but they all looked white and scared as they parades down tryin' to keep step to the march that was bein' piped out weak and faint by that gang of kids.

Honest, the only real live wire in the procession was Vee, and she even has the cheek to pass me the wink as she catches my eye. Bein' on the outside edge of the crowd, I could only get a glimpse of the group under the daisy bell, and hear the minister mumblin' over the service. All I got clear was when Ferdy is asked if he'll take Marjorie, to have and to hold, and that near finishes me. If he ever tries to hold her, all that'll be left of him'll be a smear on the upholstry.

But it didn't take long to tie the knot, once they got started, and the next thing I knew it was all over, and the bridesmaids were scramblin' for the bouquet, and Marjorie was bein' hustled upstairs to get into her travelin' clothes. Then came the waiters elbowin' in between the guests with the fancy food, and there's a jam forms in the dinin' room where the champagne was bein' passed out. Ain't they lovely affairs, these weddin's?

I was crowded into a corner with both hands full of stuff I'd smitched as the trays went past, and I was tryin' to put it away polite with my arms pinned fast on both sides and a lady's hat trimmin' ticklin' my right ear, when all of a sudden there's a shout of, "Here they come!" and down the front stairs appears Mr. and Mrs. Ferdy.

Well, it was bad enough, just all them people

starin' and shoutin' things at 'em, without the joyous little roughhouse frills Teddy and his bunch had planned. But I couldn't be heartless enough to have 'em miss the fun altogether. I dashes down and out into the area, where I'd noticed a manhole cover that I guessed must open into the coalbins. Sure enough, it did, and as I lifts it off I could see all the young sports gatherin' expectant underneath.

"Hey, Fellers," I calls, "here goes the bridal couple and you're forgettin' the rice. How thoughtless! Here it is!" and I tips the whole basketful down on 'em. "Shoes next!" I goes on, firin' down odd ones as hard as I could slam 'em. "Hi, hi! Let's enjoy ourselves. Who cares who gets hit at a weddin'? And if you can't soak the bride and groom the way they deserve—why, you can soak each other. Go to it!"

Yes, I expect Teddy and his chums were some peeved, and I hear they raised an awful howl about it to Mr. Ellins. But accordin' to Vee all he did was grin and advise 'em to wash up.

"And Marjorie," Vee goes on, "was so grateful she said she wished she could hug you. She wanted me to—"

"Then go on," says I. "Deliver the goods."

"Silly!" says Vee, pinkin' up. "I'll do nothing of the sort."

And next mornin' Piddie, who'd been left

holdin' down the lid at the shop, wants to know all about it. "I suppose for a home wedding," says he, "it was rather a grand affair?"

"Oh, sure!" says I. "When it wa'n't as solemn as an inquest, it was as cheerful and lively as a Sheriff's auction sale with free lunch on the side. But none in mine, Piddie! Elopin' looks good to me."

CHAPTER IX

GETTING FROM UNDER

You know that when it comes to gettin' in bad with the people higher up, I ain't any immune. Why, before I struck the Corrugated, it was a case of havin' the ozone pass issued to me about once in so often, or I'd begin to feel the moss growin' on my back.

Maybe you wouldn't guess it, but gen'rally the charges related how I'd been fresh with somebody or other. Uh-huh. Folks get queer notions, don't they? My rule, though, when the big wheeze got that freak idea froze in his nut, was not to make any alibi play, but just look haughty and resign. I'll admit there's been times when it was done on the jump; but I always managed to file it some way or other, even if I had to send a postcard after I'd dodged the boot.

More'n that, too, I never went into mournin' over a lost job, or missed out on any slumber wonderin' if it could have been my fault, after all. But, say, it's a long street that don't end in the plowed field somewhere. And I know now what it is to have Mr. R. E. Morse walk in

and hang up his hat. Yep! I've had 'em all lookin' slant eyed at me, from Piddie up to Old Hickory Ellins; and I've been takin' it with my chin down, feelin' about as chesty as a push-cart peddler bein' chased off the corner by a cop.

You see, it wa'n't just one item: it was the way things pyramided. For instance, gettin' Piddie wrathy over a little joshin' about his new fad of wearin' a handkerchief up his cuff—why, that's my reg'lar way of beginnin' the day. How should I guess it was goin' to give all the typists the giggles? But Piddie seemed to take it harder'n usual, and the way he glares at me was almost an assault and battery.

Then on top of that comes this report from some fussy Gladys-Maud over at Madison Square Exchange, sayin' how a certain party in our office had been impudent over the wire; and of course Piddie ain't losin' a trick. He trots it right in to the main stem and whirls the arrow around until it points to me.

"Well?" grunts Old Hickory when I answers the buzzer. "Couldn't have been you, I presume?"

"Ah, maybe I did shove over a little hot air when she was slow gettin' a number," says I; "but it wa'n't any—"

"Precisely what did you say to the operator?" demands Mr. Ellins.

"Why," says I, "I only suggests that if

she's through pattin' her ear buns into place she might stick her gum back on the switchboard and get busy with double five O three hundred Beekman, that's all."

"Really?" says Old Hickory, smilin' as humorous as a crack in a brick wall. "Quite civil—for you. Well, I'll write an apology to the manager, and we will trust that next time it won't come to a question of which we can best do without, our telephone service, or yours. That will do."

An hour later, though, I was as chirky as ever, havin' shunted a charity collector, three book agents, and a nutty inventor with a scheme for makin' hollow steel rails that could be used for pipin' natural gas from the oil fields to Broadway. I'd shunted 'em good and hard too, and was workin' up somethin' new to spring on Piddie, when all of a sudden I gets wise to the fact that someone on the cold side of the brass rail is coughin' sort of apologizin', and I throws a casual glance over my shoulder to see who's the next victim.

And what do you guess? A slit-eye—one of these real Jappy little Japs; all got up in a one-button, braid bound, 1912 model cutaway and a boy sized silk lid, lookin' as bright and shiny as a new kitchen range, and wearin' one of them creepy, Billiken brand smiles on his ugly little mug.

"If you please," he begins, "I should—"

But I wa'n't fallin' for flossy garments that day. "Back to the bamboos!" says I. "We aint buyin' any job lot curios, nor givin' out orders for cherry blossom decorations, nor anything like that."

"Ah, thank you," says he, still keepin' the smile on duty, "but I should like to—"

"Oh, sure you would!" says I. "But we ain't strong for Jap valets, or schoolboy cooks; so why take up my valuable time? Forget Port Arthur for a minute and sound the retreat before I let you through the trap door."

Does that jar him? Never a jar! He don't even blink. He just keeps on grinnin' amiable and fishes out a card. "Please to hand to Mr. Robert Ellins," says he, passin' it over.

"What's this?" says I, studyin' it out. "Nikki Taga—Tagasaki? Say, that sounds like a solo on a snare drum. And you want to see Mr. Robert, do you?"

He bows polite and continues the ivory display.

"Now, ain't that distressin'?" says I. "You hadn't heard, then, how Mr. Robert's just started for Panama to get the contract for fittin' up the canal with Yale locks?"

"I was informed below," says the Jap, "that Mr. Robert was in his office."

"Well, well!" says I. "How them fresh

elevator starters do run on! But suppose he is, Nikki? About how many chances in a hundred do you expect you stand of bein' let in? Say, do you stick out for having this presented? "

He does; also he still seems good natured about it.

" All right," says I. " You camp down there on the leather bench, and as soon as he gets through with Mr. Morgan and Willie Taft and the German Ambassador I'll slip it on his desk. Be ready for a quick getaway, though, in case the sight of you should get on his nerves. He ain't any Peace Congress, you know; specially on his busy days."

I must say, though, that they stand the gaff well, them banzai gents. Nikki bows as humble and grateful as if I'd handed him the keys to the safety deposit vaults, plants himself on the settee with his silk helmet balanced careful on his knees, and begins his wait patient and cheerful, his little black eyes dartin' here and there over the front office.

Course, if he was willin' to do the patient sitter stunt, I was willin' to let him. He'd been there more'n half an hour, maybe, when Mr. Robert strolls out of his private office lookin' for Piddie or someone. At that I steps over and gives him the tip.

" Look what's got the nerve to call for a

personal interview with you," says I. "Shall I give it the run?"

"Eh?" says Mr. Robert, gazin' out over the brass rail. He looks puzzled for a minute, and then hanged if he don't pike towards the gate holdin' out the friendly mitt. "By Jove, though!" he sings out. "If it isn't Nikki-Tikki! Well, well! How does the last of the Samurai flourish these days, eh? Welcome back, Nikki! Come on in for a moment, and presently we'll go to the club for luncheon."

With that he tows him inside, pattin' him on the back and otherwise actin' like he'd found a long lost brother. And me, I slides into the background with my eyes bugged and my lower jaw loose. So I'd up and made another miscue! Well, Nikki was such a meek little shrimp, maybe he'd forget to mention just how gay he'd been received, or how long he'd been on the siding.

But, say, what I don't know about Japs would start a circulatin' lib'ry; for when Mr. Robert drifts back from lunch, along about two-thirty, he's been well posted. Not that he indulges in any grouch oration. No, he just remarks sarcastic that he hears I'm more or less efficient as an outer guard.

"At least," he goes on, "my friend Nikki seems to have that impression."

"Squealed, did he?" says I. "But, say, Mr.

Robert, how was I to know you had any Togos on your confidential list? "

"Quite true," says he. "It happens, however, that Mr. Tagasaki was a college classmate of mine, and it turns out that he's the son of a Baron or something. Quite a personage, you see. So in future perhaps it would be just as well not to advise him to go back to the bamboos when he calls for me. Do you—er—get me? "

"Yes, Sir," says I, swallowin' hard and wonderin' if my ears looked as hot as they felt.

"And by way of reparation," says Mr. Robert, "I should suggest that to-morrow, when Mr. Tagasaki drops in, you might acknowledge your—er—mistake, and assure him that he has the entire freedom of the offices."

"If you say so," says I, "I'll take the gate off the hinges."

Anyway, if queerin' myself all round was what I'd tried for, I'd made a good start. And somehow it struck me I'd sort of overdone it in spots. Not that I was so deep in love with my job I wanted to marry it, or have it chained to me for life; but I didn't want to chuck it away foolish, either.

So I hands Tagasaki the best apology I've got in stock, holds the gate wide open for him, and invites him to make himself at home anywhere

in the shop. It came as hard as anything I ever did, too, even though Nikki don't try to rub it in. He says it's perfectly all right between us, and that he didn't mind my playful little ways one bit; and all the while he wears that unconvincin' Jap smile which reminds me of the friendly expression a fox terrier shoots at a cat he's got in a corner.

Nikki ain't bashful about acceptin' the freedom of the gen'ral offices, either. From that on he comes and goes as easy as if he'd been a fire inspector, or one of the board of directors; strollin' into Mr. Robert's room any time of day, struttin' round watchin' the typists work, and lettin' Piddie show him all the sights, from the card index cases to the big safes. Piddie, he'd heard this Baron rumor about Nikki, and he almost breaks his neck doin' the flunky act for him.

Meantime the general frostiness towards me don't melt any. Instead of that the cold wave seemed to set in harder. Mr. Robert don't stop at my desk any more to work off one of his gags, Old Hickory gives me the cold eye as he pads by, and by the looks I get from Piddie you'd thought I was inhabitin' one of the condemned cells up at Sing Sing. Honest, things was gettin' so chilly around there I almost felt like I needed mittens and earmuffs durin' office hours.

And then, for a final touch of gloom, this Googan party shows up.

Piddie, strange to relate, takes pains to tell me who and what he is. "Mr. Googan," says he, "is a bond expert from our Philadelphia branch. He is preparing a special statement for the annual meeting. You will see that he is supplied with anything he wishes, and you will answer any questions he may ask you."

"Suppose he calls for a plate of hot fudge, and wants to know why a duck can't play the flute?" says I.

"That is quite enough, young man!" says Piddie, swingin' on his heel. "You have your orders."

"Oh, slap!" says I. "Take that, and that!"

Followin' which, I looks Mr. Googan over curious. Bond expert, was he? Huh! He looked more like a race track booky on his Sunday off. He wears a soft brown lid so fuzzy it would purr if you stroked it, and one of these horse blanket checked suits that looked like it had been marked out for a tennis court. His outdoors complexion don't fit the description of his job, either; but maybe they're so crowded for deskroom in Quayville that they use the open lots.

Anyway, I carted ink and pens and paste over to him, and had some bond cases brought in,

and made him real comfy. They set his desk plunk in the middle of the front office, which struck me funny at the start. Next I noticed that every time I glanced his way, instead of havin' his shoulders humped over the blotter and his nose in the cases, he was squintin' sleuthy around the shop, gen'rally in my direction. And with that I rigs up a little pocket mirror so I could keep tabs on him without him gettin' wise.

Must have been a couple of hours, too, before I had sense enough to look at his hoofs. But there they were, reg'lar, wide toed, rubber heeled pavement pounders, such as every cop, or anybody that's ever been on the force, always wears. And the minute I spots 'em I has Googan mapped. Bond expert nothin'! He was either sent up from Headquarters, or from some private detective agency, on a special detail.

But what sort of a detail? And why was I gettin' the benefit? I hadn't asked myself more'n half a dozen questions like that before I needed a chunk of ice down the back of my neck. But, knowin' that state of mind wa'n't worth encouragin', I simmered down and pretty soon I sidles over his way.

"How are you comin' on, Mr. Googan?" says I, as smooth as putty.

"Oh, fine!" says Googan, spreadin' out one

of our fancy engraved Development Sixes and puttin' down some figures on a pad.

"You'll find the serial numbers on the back, you know," I suggests, soft and easy.

"Eh?" says he, flushin' up. "Oh, of course." With that he flops the bond over and begins huntin' through the machine scrollwork for figures.

"Ah, ha!" says I. "I thought so! Say, Googan, your disguise as a bond expert ought to be put in some melodrama. It's a scream."

And Googan turns purple in the gills. "Think so, do you?" he explodes. "Well, it may not turn out so funny for you later on, my son. I've had my eyes on you."

"Gwan, you fathead!" says I. "Any second class sneak could steal the socks off your feet. What you sleuthin' me for, anyway?"

"You'll find that out in due time, my fresh lad," says Googan, glarin' goggle eyed.

"I can do better'n that," says I, and marches straight into Mr. Robert's room and up to the desk where he was sittin'.

"Excuse me for advancin' the schedule of events," says I, "but why the Hawkshaw?"

"Eh? What's that?" says Mr. Robert.

"The solid ivory out there with the tin badge on his suspender?" says I.

"I'm afraid," says Mr. Robert, "that I don't quite follow you yet."

"Ah, Googan," says I, "the one that's posin' as an expert and don't know a non-interest seven from a magazine subscription coupon. One of them ex-flat foots, that's what he is, and he's here tryin' to work up a case. Do I ring the bell?"

And it's one of the few times I ever saw Mr. Robert look at all foolish. "Hang it!" he breaks out, "I 'phoned the agency manager he must send me one of his cleverest men, and here you've found him out the first forenoon."

"Why not?" says I. "I can still see a little out of one eye. And with sleuthin' goin' on so close, I got int'rested."

"Of course," says Mr. Robert. "I suppose I might as well tell you now that there exists a leakage somewhere about the office, a leakage that must be stopped."

"Not cash?" says I.

"No, business secrets, contents of confidential letters, and so on," says he. "Our esteemed British rivals, the Birmingham people, seem to have been profiting, too. Hence, Mr. Googan."

"But he keeps his slimy eyes glued to me," says I, gettin' pink in the ears again. "And, say, Mr. Robert, it may be a delicate way of payin' a compliment, but I—"

"Yes, yes, I know," says he. "That is Mr. Piddie's notion."

"Ah, Piddie!" says I. "Why, if a manhole should blow up in the street, he'd try to blame me for it. Piddie! Say, he's got boll weevils in his intellect and mush on the brain. He'd suspect me of anything, Piddie would."

"And still," comes back Mr. Robert, squintin' hard at me with them gray-blue eyes of his, "is it not true, as Mr. Piddie suggests, that you have charge of the letterpress, and have better opportunities for seeing all the correspondence than almost anyone else?"

That was a staggerer, that was. Up to then I hadn't dreamed Mr. Robert would fall for any dope like that about me. Course, I could see where it might look bad, if you had a mind to squint at it suspicious that way; and I expect there's nothin' would make him sore so quick as to think someone inside had been sellin' him out. But for him to let 'em put the tag on me at the first hint—well, I got choky tongued over it, that's all. I just stood there swallowin' lumps and starin' at him cross eyed.

"To be sure," he goes on, "I hope personally that Mr. Piddie is wrong. If he is right, however, and you have anything to say to me before this goes any further, I shall be very glad to—"

"No, you wouldn't," I breaks in. "If I've been peddlin' the firm's letters and you can nail me at it, all you got a right to do is kick me

out. But don't look for any weepy confessions out of me. I'm either crooked or straight, and you and Googan have started in to find out which. That bein' the case, all I got to say is, blaze ahead. Maybe I won't enjoy the process; but I'll tell you one thing: you can count on me to stick around until it's all over."

We was lookin' each other square in the eye, and when I winds up Mr. Robert shoves out his hand. "Thank you, Torchy," says he. "You shall have every chance I can give you."

That helped some; but it didn't clear up anything, and as I goes back on the gate I finds Piddie and Googan in close confab. Maybe I put in a comf'table afternoon, too. Yes, I did—like a smoosh! First I'd have a spell when all the hot claret I had went gallopin' up into my neck and face, and then I'd get chills down the back. Gettin' wrathy always affects me like that. But I kept the lid on, and after awhile I quit plannin' diff'rent ways of spoilin' Piddie's frontispiece, and begun usin' my bean on the proposition.

Even if I did know I hadn't been playin' the sneak sieve act, the fact remained that someone had, and until the guilty party was smoked out I was as good as it. There wa'n't any sense in throwin' it back at Piddie, either. He wouldn't have the sand, in the first place. Then there was the flossy new lady typist, that

splurged on baby Irish collars and big bunches of violets. Most likely that trail would lead to some old squash head that took her out for table d'hôte luncheons.

I was still goin' over the list, tryin' to dig up a few suspects, when out through the gate struts Mr. Tagasaki, smokin' his cigarette and swingin' his cane jaunty, and it just strikes me that Mr. Robert's been gone quite some time.

It lacked more'n half an hour of closin' time; but I grabs my hat, slides out easy behind him, watches him take a local elevator down, catches the next express car myself, and I'm just in time to swing in behind him as he steps lively out through the arcade into Broadway.

How did I know? I didn't. I just felt it in the top of my nut. Besides, I was ready to take any kind of a chance.

Did it lead anywhere? Say, the time between breakfast next mornin' and the minute when Mr. Robert showed up at the office, with me waitin' to spring it on him, seemed about a month long. Piddie had somethin' to unload too; but I beat him to it.

"Well, Torchy?" says Mr. Robert, when I chases him in and shuts the door careful. "What now?"

"Only this," says I, flashin' the crumpled sheet of Corrugated letterhead that I'd had under my pillow all night. And I could tell by

the way his brow furrowed up as he ran over the notes on it that he was some joggled.

"Boy," says he, "where did you find this?"

"It wa'n't a find," says I: "it was a case of pinchin' it. Mr. Tagasaki had it tight in his fist."

"Nikki!" says Mr. Robert, suckin' in his breath. "That's so, by Jove! It's his writing!"

"I had a hunch it might be," says I, "when I see him pikin' into the Metropolitan Buildin' and takin' it out of his inside pocket so cautious. He was too busy goin' over it to notice me in the same elevator; but I couldn't get near enough to peek over his shoulder, so when he gets out and stops in front of the Birmingham-Wales Consolidated—"

"Went directly there, did he?" says Mr. Robert through his teeth.

"Uh-huh," says I. "And was pushin' right in when I—well, I must have slipped or somethin', for I bumped him kind of hard, and swiped this at the same time. After that it was a case of who could sprint down fourteen flights of marble steps faster. He ain't so slow on his feet, either; but I guess he was too anxious, or else the cane tripped him. Anyway, the last I saw he was caromin' against a scrub lady about the sixth floor. But, say, Mr. Robert, you

A Case of Which Could Sprint Faster. *Page* 160.

UNIV. OF MICH.

don't need any plumber to plug that leak now, do you?"

Ah, what's the use? It was a smear for the Jap. All that Baron business was a fake, too.

Me? Say, shade your eyes now! Yep! That's what Mr. Robert laid on my desk this noon. Thin one, ain't it? Them's the classy clocks, you know. And there's goin' to be some engravin' done on the outside of the case; and when it's all fixed up, with a monogram fob, Mr. Robert says he's goin' to call the force together and have Piddie make the presentation speech. Fancy that, now!

CHAPTER X

STRIKING A LEVEL ON LAMMA-LU

EVEN when you know better, it's hard to forget that what everybody says ain't always so. And they gen'rally begin about this time of year, when the Fifth-ave. folks put up their wooden fronts and the Third-ave. people start sleepin' on the fire escapes, to tell how dull the town is.

Piddie shoots it off first, because he's just read it in the paper. Skid Mallory makes the same announcement, because he's let young Mrs. Skid go West for a visit to Pa and Ma; and Old Hickory Ellins, with the folks all in Newport and half his best enemies gone from the club, remarks vigorous as he pads in from lunch fannin' himself with his forty-dollar panama, that of all the blinkety blanked hot, uninterestin' holes this side of the great sulphur springs, New York is the worst.

So, when I'm turned loose from the Corrugated that Saturday noon, and find a few more empty chairs than usual at the dairy lunch, and remember that the Yanks are playin' in Phillie this week, and notice how scatterin'

the crowds are on the sunny side of Broadway, I almost has to admit that there are times when this is a dead slow burg.

"Nothin' doin', up or down," says I to myself. "Gee but I wish I was off in some live wire junction where things was happenin'!"

I'd backed up into the shade of a closed store entrance and was just figurin' out a Coney Island program to shake the willies, when all of a sudden I gets wise to the fact that I'm bein' sized up by a passin' gent. Before I can do more than give him a quick squint and decide that likely he's some bum actor preparin' to touch me for a cigarette, he swings in easy and graceful and ranges up alongside.

"Ah, ha!" says he, sort of chuckly. "By the great horned frog of Yucatan! The much desired tint!"

"Muh!" says I. "Another nutty victim of the picture shows. Gwan!"

"Pardon me," says he, "if I allowed my enthusiasm to make me forget the conventions; but I have searched long and vainly for such as you, my son."

"Have, eh?" says I, backin' off. It might be wheels and maybe it was only the heat; but it was dippy dialogue he was passin' out, and I wa'n't takin' any chances.

"Fear not, Son," says he. "I come as a friend."

"You got a good disguise on," says I. "What's the game?"

"Permit me first," says he, "to allay your very natural hesitancy to talk to a stranger. My *carte de visite.*"

With that he slips me an engraved card which says how he is Mr. Payson Bannister Wicks, D.A.

"That's some name," says I; "but the D.A.? I can't connect. Doctor of which?"

"Archeology," says he.

"Never had a corn in my life," says I.

"No, no!" says he. "Scientific research among the relics of ancient civilization is my field. I specialize in the antiquities of religion."

"Thanks," says I; "but I ain't buyin' any antiques to-day."

"To reduce my proposal to a coldly commercial basis," says Mr. Wicks, "may I ask if you would seriously object to making five dollars easy money?"

"Flash the five," says I.

And Payson Bannister, havin' shrugged his shoulders, unlimbers a bill fold that was fat with crisp ones; while, if I'd been writin' his customs declaration after that first glimpse, I'd put him down for a few unredeemed pledge tickets, a lucky pocketpiece, and about thirty-eight cents cash.

Come to look him over close, though, I could see he wa'n't costumed like the last act of better days. His high crowned gray felt with the black band still has the fact'ry finish to it, his featherweight gray mohair must have been built to fit them broad shoulders, and his tan walkin' pumps was the latest thing in classy footwear.

Yet there was something about that big, heavy face of his that didn't exactly suit me. Maybe it was the thick under lip, or the sag to his lower jaw, or the quick shift to his gray-green eyes. Anyway, he was almost too smooth to be true, and I wa'n't goin' to let anybody do the conversational snake charmer act on me.

"I'm nibblin'; but I ain't swallowin' the bait whole yet," says I. "Now what's the rest? Want me to hold the fake wallet while you take my watch as security and find a friend?"

"I am grieved, Son, deeply grieved," says the D.A., "to be the subject of such unjust suspicion, when my simple purpose is to secure your assistance in an enterprise of high merit."

Say, he did it well too; nothin' gushy, no overplayin' the part, but just a pained, sad look, and a deep sigh.

"Ah, chirk up," says I, "and let's hear how it is I can win the five!"

"Thanks, child of the sun, thanks," says he. "Know, then, that you are called of Zapira to be her acolyte."

"I've been called out of my name lots of times, Mr. Wicks," says I; "but this is where I get off and ask directions. Her aco—which?"

"An acolyte," says he, "is one who assists at a sacred rite. Zapira, golden haired daughter of the Incas, would have you attend her at the altar."

"Best man, or groom?" says I.

"Nay, nay!" says Payson. "You are wanted as helper to a priestess. It is for you to bear the symbols of an ancient faith. That is all. And the sacred ceremony lasts not more than half an hour."

"When does it come off?" says I.

"This very eventide," says Wicks, "the same being the beginning of the year four thousand and ten, according to the calendar of Kechua the Great. You come a little before nine, and nine-forty-five you depart."

"And it's five a throw?" says I.

"In advance, if you like," says Wicks, reachin' for the wad.

"Tut, tut!" says I. "I ain't signed on yet. Is it on account of my thatch I'm picked for this?"

"Aye, the gods have prepared you for it," says Wicks. "You are favored with the golden aureole, even as Zapira, and she will be well pleased to look upon you."

"That's cheerin'," says I; "but don't you

go to bankin' too heavy on me. Course, I ain't castin' asparagus, or anything like that; but this sacred rite business sounds like phony press agent stuff. You'll find plenty of Reddies, though, that ain't so partic'lar, and I guess you better hunt up another."

"I'll make it ten," says Wicks. "Come, now!"

"Ten's harder to pass by than five," I admits, "but I'd have to hear more details in words I could understand."

"Why, certainly," says Wicks. "As we walk up the street."

And, say, hanged if he couldn't put it over convincin'! Seems Wicks was a college professor who'd had to quit for a year on account of his health, and while he was vacatin' in Spain he runs across an old Spanish explorer's book that told about this temple of Lamma-Lu. At first he didn't know whether to take any stock in it or not; for as a tale of glitterin' gold it was a whopper.

Accordin' to the book, this temple was in Peru, 'way back in the mountains somewhere, and it had a floor paved with solid gold blocks; but it wa'n't any account of sordid gold that interested Professor Payson Bannister Wicks. What got him stirred up was the hint that here was a clew to the last stand made by the Incas, the scene of the finish of the wonderful, mystic,

prehistoric religion which was already old before Moses built the ark. Eh? Well—before something of the kind happened.

Course, I can't give it to you the way Wicks fed it to me, for he sure did know how to juggle language; but you can get the idea. They worshiped the sun, them old Incas did, and made a thorough job of it, buildin' whackin' big temples that would lay over anything we've got on Fifth-ave. to-day. The priests was the whole show too, runnin' the Gover'ment as well as the churches, and doin' all the graftin' and all the prayin' themselves. Every bit of gold that was mined they grabbed for the temples, and you can figure out they must have been some class with eighteen-carat tiles for the floors.

But extravagance like that was what let 'em in bad at the last. Along came the Spaniards, hungry for just such building material, and the way they rough-housed them sun worshipers and their temples was something fierce. They chased 'em from place to place, robbin' and killin', until they was scattered worse'n the Prohibition vote in a Tammany ward.

Now, Professor Wicks he'd studied all about these people, and he'd been thinkin' of takin' a trip down there to paw around among the old ruins; so when he gets this hunch about the temple of Lamma-Lu, off he pikes. The directions was kind of vague, and he had his doubts

about findin' the exact spot; but he blazes ahead.

"And, Son," says he, stoppin' me impressive in the middle of the sidewalk in Greeley Square, "I not only found the temple of Lamma-Lu, hidden though it was in an almost inaccessible valley behind the great peaks of the Andes, but I discovered the Priestess Zapira, sole survivor of the Incas. She is here, right here in New York."

"Gee!" says I. "What for!"

"Ah!" says Wicks. "The very point I was coming to."

And it's all simple enough. Zapira was tryin' to collect enough of her people to clear away the wreck of the old temple and build a sort of a chapel on the spot, it being her scheme to hold a kind of sun worshipers' revival and start things goin' again. But, as the recruits was few and as the temple wa'n't much more'n a heap of stones, it seemed like a hopeless job.

Then Professor Wicks comes to the front with his proposition. If Zapira would go with him to New York, tell the people what she wanted to do, show them how the sacred rites of sun worshipin' was worked, and all that, he would bet his head against a cocoanut that she could get the proper backin' to rebuild Lamma-Lu accordin' to the original specifications, with steam heat, open plumbin', and stained glass

windows thrown in; providin', of course, she was willin' to swap the solid gold pavin' for the best mosaic tilin' turned out in Trenton, N. J. And Zapira, who cared more for her ancient religion than for all the gold you could load on a train of coal cars, said she was perfectly willin'. Tiles for her, every time!

"Which brings us," says Professor Wicks, "to the humble but somewhat essential part I am asking you to take in this noble enterprise. Thanks to my untiring efforts, I have been able to interest a number of influential men of affairs in our plans for restoring the temple of Lamma-Lu and of reviving a religion whose origin has been lost in the mists of prehistoric ages. This very night some of them will gather to witness the Priestess Zapira go through those ancient rites. Here in the midst of this wicked city she has set up her altar to that deity whom primitive man first honored with his crude homage,—to the great round sun. She demands a cup-bearer, an acolyte; but he must be a child of the sun, a golden haired one, like herself. None other will answer. And you, young man—well—"

"I see," says I, takin' off my straw lid to let him have a good view. "I ought to qualify in the finals, eh?"

"You do," says he. "And you'll come?"

Well, there I was, dead up against it. Course,

it was a weird proposition to have sprung on you, right on Broadway of a Saturday afternoon, this tale of old Spaniards, and ruined temples, and a priestess from Peru. And I expect, if I'd been better posted along them lines, I'd have done the suspicious duck; but, hearin' Professor Wicks tell it all so straight and earnest, and bein' some curious about this altar stunt—well, I fell for it.

"Eight-forty-five, eh?" says I. "Gimme the number, and I'll be there."

It wa'n't any hamfatters' roost down in the theatrical district, either. It's the first floor suite of a swell boardin' house up in the 70's, with a neat dressed maid on the door. And when I'm towed in to Professor Wicks I find him got up in full, open faced evenin' clothes. He's busy arrangin' a bunch of long stemmed roses in a tall vase, and placin' the chairs around in a semicircle facin' the curtain that shuts off the back parlor.

"Well, Profess," says I, "you see I'm runnin' on sched."

"S-s-s-sh!" says he, givin' the soft pedal sign. "The Priestess Zapira has entered the sacred silence while the incense burns on the altar. Softly, now, softly! Here are the vestments of your office."

With that he lugs out what looks like a white cotton nighty with long, flowin' sleeves edged

with three inches of bright red ribbon. When he's dropped that over my head and tied it tight above my collar, he picks up a gilt medal cut out to look like a sunburst and drapes it around my neck like a chest protector. Next he takes a comb and fluffs out my red hair, and as a finishin' touch he hands me a brass bowl about the size of a wash basin.

"Gee!" I whispers, gettin' a glimpse in the pier glass. "I'm all dolled up now, ain't I?"

"You are attired as befits one who attends the Priestess Zapira before the altar of the Incas," says Wicks, solemn and serious. "Now prepare yourself to enter the presence and receive instruction in your duties."

Oh, you can snicker now; but you ain't gettin' the full effects of that dim light, and the drawn curtains, and all the rest. Honest, it near had my knees wabbly, and when he calls out low and husky, "O Zapira, the acolyte awaits your pleasure!" I was swallowin' hard and gettin' dry in the throat.

"Come!" says a voice behind the curtain, and Wicks grabs me by the hand and drags me in.

And, say, I ain't much up on ancient altars; but I should say this was a good specimen. It's about eight feet long, and six or seven high, all glitterin' with gilt paper, and with three or

four red steps leadin' up to the front. Just over it hangs a blazin' sun more'n two feet across, and at either end comes up a gold torch with real flames shootin' out of the top.

I'd gawped at it a minute and had got my eyes used to the bright light before I discovers the priestess. She's wearin' a white robe too, only hers is soft and silky and the red decorations is more flossy. She's layin' back easy in a big chair, with her head half turned away; but I can see she's a stunnin' big woman, with a lot of copper red hair that's braided in two long plaits and brought over her shoulders.

I was just wonderin' whether it was up to me to drop on both knees and bump my head on the rug, or wait for her to give the signal, when she turns around slow and deliberate. And, say, you could have blown me over with a breath. The Priestess Zapira! Ah, guff! Didn't I use to see her on an average of twice a day around at Mother Sykes', when she was doin' the fortune tellin' act in the back parlor and I had a room on the top floor? And hadn't I butted in and staked her to a five-spot once when business had been dull and the Sykes person was havin' it out in the hall about back rent and the wear of so many visitors trampin' over the carpet?

"Why, hello, Madam Lecour!" says I.

For a second there, as she jumped to her feet

and looked wild, I thought she was goin' to make a dash for the street, just as she was; but it was only a spasm. Next minute she steadies down, takes a good look at me, and then throws back her head for a low, ripply laugh.

"Well, well!" says she. "Torchy!"

"Some disguise," says I; "but no more'n you."

At that Professor Wicks, who's been standin' goggle eyed and open mouthed, breaks in. "I—er—I trust that our young friend," says he, "does not fancy that in the Priestess Zapira he recognizes someone whom he—"

"Ah, dry up, Wicksy!" says Madam Lecour. "Of course he knows me."

With that she lets loose another laugh, and then, settlin' back comf'table, digs up the cigarette she'd hid away a minute before and proceeds to burn some more incense.

"But, my dear," says Wicks, lookin' worried from one to the other of us, "how could I tell? We needed a red haired youth, you know, and—and I found one."

"Yes, you've mussed things up, as usual, Wicksy," says she, puffin' rings placid.

"I take it, then," says I, "that all this lovely tale you pumped into me about temples paved with gold was more or less hot air, eh? Well, it was a bird!"

"Why—er—you see, my dear young man,"

begins the Professor, "it may be that in the warmth of my zeal for—"

"There, there, Wicksy!" breaks in Madam Lecour. "What's the use? And it's a fool scheme, anyway. I always said it was. You see, Torchy, what I get by marrying a back number sideshow manager. Look at the pipe dream he thinks he can get away with! Might be all right under a canvas top, maybe, with a lot of country boobs ready to throw their quarters into the box; but to spring a thing like this on city people— No, no, Wicksy!"

"But haven't I made good so far?" demands Payson Bannister. "What about the five hundred I scooped in last week?"

"Big risks, Wicksy, big risks, though," says Madam Lecour. "And I don't like it. I should have stuck to palms, and you to doing your refined museum lectures. That was straight coin. But this— Ugh! It makes me creepy."

"Pooh!" says Wicks. "Besides, it's too late to quit now. They'll be here any moment. Son, do you still want to earn that ten?"

"Nix for me!" says I. "I ain't ringin' in any alarm on an old friend; but I've got to back out."

"As you choose," says he. "Then you'll have to go on without a helper, Minnie."

"Not to-night, Wicksy," says Madam Lecour. "I've been jolted too hard."

"But what can I do?" says he. "What can I tell them?"

"Ah, say I'm in a trance, or a faint—anything to stand 'em off," says she. "Perhaps by to-morrow, or the day after, I can—"

"Here they come!" says Wicks. "The bell!"

Well, as there was no gettin' out for me then, I stays behind the curtain chattin' with Madam Lecour, while the professor receives the guests and hands out the smooth talk. The bell kept ringin' and ringin', until there must have been ten or a dozen out front; and I judged Wicksy was havin' a busy session, for at times we could hear three or four talkin' at once. But the professor was right there with the palaver, and inside of a quarter of an hour he's cleared the room.

"Well," says he, showin' up once more between the draperies and moppin' his brow, "I've stood 'em off for this time, Minnie. Some didn't like it much and béefed for the show to go on; but I promised Tuesday night for sure, and at last I got 'em all out."

"All but one!" growls a deep, heavy voice behind the professor. And if Wicks turned cheese color and shook in his shoes, so did I; for I knew the voice. "Huh!" it goes on. "Thought you could flimflam me, did you?

Well, by the great snortin' snakes! we'll see about that."

And pushin' past the professor comes—honest, I hate to name him, but you'd never guess who—Old Hickory Ellins!

"Now," says he, nailin' Wicks by the collar, "I want to know just what sort of a—"

That's as far as he got, though; for just then as he glares around the room, them cut-steel eyes of his light on me, standin' there lookin' foolish and tryin' to untie the puckerin' string of that blamed nighty.

"Well, I'll be eternally crisped!" he gasps out. "You!"

"Uh-huh," says I, grinnin' in spite of myself.

"And what in the name of the blithering blazes," says he, "might you be doing here?"

"Aconitin' the altar," says I.

"Wha-a-at?" he snorts.

"Well, somethin' like that," says I. "Only I've resigned. I quit as soon as I finds it's a bunk frame-up and that the Priestess Zapira was only Madam Lecour."

"Oh!" he sneers. "Then you are acquainted with one of this precious pair of swindlers, are you?"

"Ah, say, Mr. Ellins," says I, "don't go drawin' it too strong on Madam Lecour. She's an old boardin' house friend of mine that's al-

ways done straight palm readin' until she was dragged into this priestess stunt by Hubby here."

"If Mr. Ellins will grant me but a moment," breaks in Wicks, "I shall endeavor to explain—"

"Say, I've heard too much from you already," snaps Old Hickory, "and you couldn't tell the truth if you tried, anyway. I prefer to listen to Torchy. Come, young man, get out of that fancy dress kimono and trot along with me!"

"Sure," says I.

"In case of any dissatisfaction," says the professor, "I am ready to return your subscription, Sir."

"More fool you, then," says Mr. Ellins. "I'd advise you to invest that hundred in railroad tickets, and use 'em mighty quick. Come along, Torchy."

That's the game old sport he is. He'd been stung good and plenty, and he'd been sore about it! but as soon as I'd given him the whole story about Madam Lecour he just grins.

"Well," says he, "as a source of hot weather amusement it was almost worth the price. Anyway, I guess none of us can afford to squeal."

"But, say, Mr. Ellins," says I, as we parts at the corner, "which was it he got you on, the

scheme for restorin' the temple, or the gold-brick proposition?"

"See here, Son," says Old Hickory, pattin' me heavy on the back, "let's you and I not ask each other any embarrassing questions. What we want to do now is to forget."

Well, I'm doin' my best; but don't anybody try to tell me how this is a dull town, at any time of year.

CHAPTER XI

PIDDIE GETS ONE OFF THE BAT

COURSE, the only one I could work up any real keen regrets for in this mixup the other afternoon was Piddie. Oh, yes! I ain't quite got to the stage where I wake up at night and wonder if by any careless slip durin' the day I've done anything to annoy Mr. Piddie; but it sure would be a shame to mess up the harmony of such a noble soul!

It was Piddie starts me out with strict instructions that I must report back at the office by three-thirty, no matter what happened. He'd gone over for the third time all about how careful I must be of this bunch of papers I was to take up to an alfalfa plute, where the hotel was exactly, and so on, and he winds up by remarkin' once more, "And you know if you're not back here by half after three—"

"Sure, Piddie," says I, "I know; the roof'll fall in, and the boiler'll blow up, and the ice-water cooler'll break out with the hives. So hold the watch on me while I take a flyin' start."

For all I was deliverin' was some duplicate

contracts to a chesty gent who was too hookwormy to come down after 'em himself. But Piddie never loses any chance of tryin' to put me in wrong, and this settin' a time limit on me in the hope of a subway block or something like that is one of his fav'rite schemes. This was once too where he stood to win.

No, it wa'n't any hold-up on the Interborough. I makes the big uptown hotel well inside the schedule, sends a 'phone message from the desk up to the plute's room, unloads the package straight and proper, and am nicely on my way down from the seventeenth floor without anybody even crossin' their fingers on me.

At the fifteenth young Smoky Days, the Jamaica brunette who's jugglin' the speed lever, brings the big cage up with a jerk and slams back the door for a couple I'd seen waitin' as I went up. They'd missed cars on either side of 'em and was stickin' to this shaft, watchin' the indicator lights solemn and patient.

And they sure was a jay pair to be driftin' around in a ten-a-day house like that. The gent is one of these wide shouldered, heavy built parties, with a rugged home made face, a generous mouth, and thick ears that stuck out like wings would on a pig. He's wearin' a nobby sack suit with a brown, green, and red plaid pattern that allows about two and a half

squares across the back, and the front of his vest is decorated with secret order pins and medals like the uniform coat of a crack bandmaster.

The lady with him is a chunky, bunchy little party with a button nose, apple tinted cheeks, and a lot of worry creases across her forehead that's worked in so deep no face massage treatments could ever steam 'em out. There's no tellin' what crossroads emporium fitted her out with the demihobble costume she has on; but that, and the freak lid, and the three cunnin' little curls danglin' just behind her left ear, puts the Podunk sign on her for fair. My first guess about them was that they'd sold out the sausage and tripe business and had come East on some round trip excursion.

Guests is guests, though; so Smoky throws the gate for 'em. They're just about to step in cautious, when along the corridor comes sailin' an entirely diff'rent pair,—a clean built, swell dressed young chappy, like them you see in the collar ads, and a classy lookin' young lady whose costume couldn't have left Paris more'n a month ago.

Do the newcomers wait to inspect the elevator or inquire if it's their turn? Not much! Reggie boy swings a shoulder in front of the ex-sausage maker, brushes the demihobble skirt one side with his stick, hands his young lady,

and then steps in himself. It's all done so snappy that the crossroads couple are left with one foot in the air and their mouths open.

"Come, come! Lively, now! Going down-n-n-n!" sings out the lever juggler, rattlin' the door catch peevish.

Well, they look kind of fussed and nervous; but it's plain they ain't sure whether there's any call for them to get grouchy or not; so in they stumbles and sidles off into the corner without a word. I could easy have felt sore for 'em; but what was the use when it would be all over in a minute, I thinks, and the five of us would be scatterin' for diff'rent points, maybe never as much as to rub elbows again this side of Kingdom Come?

You never can bank on futures, though, can you, even when you can count the tricks on your fingers? Next thing we know the elevator comes to a sudden stop between the eleventh and twelfth floors, and the country couple, bein' handy to the leather bench, and not being braced for anything like that, sits down abrupt and solid. Then for a minute or so we all watches Smoky jerk the handle back and forth without producin' any results, and then I thinks it's up to me to break the silence.

"Bugged the gears that time, eh?" I remarks.

"Nah!" says he, shruggin' his shoulders. "Power's gone."

"What's that?" says Reggie, speakin' up sharp. "Why don't you go on, Boy?"

Maybe it was the tone he said it in, or maybe it was only that "boy" on the end; but the brunette youth from the West Indies ain't ready with the polite response. He just rolls the whites of his eyes at Reggie and then turns his back on him.

"I say, you!" insists Reggie. "What are we stopping here for, you know? Why don't you go on?"

"Don't you hear, Alfonso?" says I. "Why don't you drop us? Can't you see the young gentleman's in a hurry?"

"Ah, what do I care?" grumbles Smoky.

"Well, I must say!" growls Reggie, tappin' the rubber mat with his stick real pettish. "Is not this annoying, Gladys?"

"It's quite too absurd, Pierpont," says Gladys.

"Now I guess you'll start something!" says I to Alfonso.

All he does, though, is to yell down the shaft to the starter, askin' what's happened to the power.

"Shut off!" calls back the starter. "The water's been shut off."

"What!" says Pierpont. "Water shut off? What for, and for how long?"

But the starter don't know. He says he'll ask the engineer. Two minutes more, and we has the satisfaction of hearin' that the engineer don't know.

"But, see here, Starter," sings out Pierpont, "this is a deuced nuisance, y'know! It's an outrage, bah Jove! Send for the manager. Tell him Mr. E. Pierpont Boggs wishes to see him."

"Aha!" says I on the side to Alfonso. "Now some one's goin' to get slapped on the wrist for this!"

But Alfonso don't seem worried a bit. He climbs up on his stool and proceeds to dig literature out of his pocket. It's one of them Nick Carter airship yarns, and he turns eager to page three, finds his place by a thumbprint, and from then on is as much out of range of all trouble as a cat sleepin' on a sunny window ledge.

As for the crossroads pair, they ain't opened their heads, even to swap a whisper; not knowin', I expect, whether this was a reg'lar stunt of high priced hotel elevators or not. And me, I leans back against the side grating and tries to whistle something soft and soothin'. What's the use of my frettin' when Pierpont was doin' such a thorough job at it? He don't let up until

he's had 'em rout out the manager, who arrives at the tenth floor with hardly breath enough left to talk.

"Regret very deeply," he puffs out; "but we can't help it, Mr. Boggs. There's been a break in one of the large mains,—blasting caused it, I understand,—and the city department had to shut off the water. They've just notified us. The plungers are not working, you see; but the safety catches are holding nicely. You are perfectly secure, you know."

"Secure!" explodes Pierpont. "I should say we were! It's as bad as being in jail. And I don't like it!"

The manager, he apologizes all over again.

"But how long will it be before the water is turned on again?" asks Pierpont.

"Oh, not more than an hour or so—two at the most," says the manager, which brings a howl out of Pierpont.

"Two hours!" says he. "But we cawn't do it, you know, we simply cawn't! We—er—I have a very important engagement, and our—er—my train leaves at four o'clock. Don't you understand? You must get us out of here at once!"

Yes, the manager says he understands. He's sent for the elevator people, told 'em to bring ropes and tools and so on, and he's sure they'll do their best when they arrive. Also he says

it's too bad we got caught just as we did; for they'd got the folks out of all the other elevators, except one fat woman who was stuck in Number Three and couldn't be lifted through a two-foot crack. They'd passed her in some luncheon, though, and she wa'n't making any fuss.

But that don't calm Pierpont. He keeps right on gettin' wrathy. "Think of it, Gladys!" says he.

"It's simply dreadful!" says Gladys. "And what are we going to do about—"

"S-s-sh!" says Pierpont. "We will do something, I don't know what. I must think. And here we are, shut up with these persons!"

"Ah, say," says I, "I guess if we can stand it, you can. It works both ways, Pierpy."

"Humph!" says he, givin' me the icy stare for a second.

"Not so rough, Pierpont, not so rough!" says I. "There's ladies present."

Then the sausage maker clears his throat and remarks, sort of husky and embarrassed, "Don't the lady want to sit down?"

"She does not!" speaks up Pierpont, glancin' scornful at the plaid suit.

Course, they was an odd pair, the two on the bench, and if I was pickin' folks to be shut up with in an elevator I don't know as I'd tagged these partic'lar ones myself; but I couldn't see

where they'd earned any such blackballin' process as Pierpont was handin' 'em. The fact that they was way station delegates travelin' a little out of their class was plain enough. They knew it and acted it, and what was the sense of rubbin' it in? So when this crisp comeback is shot over, and I see how it makes the gent wince, I has to butt in.

"Gee!" says I, winkin' over at the tourist pair, "but some folks is exclusive, ain't they?"

All they did, though, was to grin sort of sheepish; while Pierpont and Gladys, to show how far beneath their notice we were, resumes the debate over their private affairs just as though they was all alone.

First off I thought they must be married; but later on I wa'n't so sure. Seems Pierpont has been sent for to go West in a hurry on some business or other, and he'd planned for Gladys to go part way with him. Then they'd stop off and see her mother about something important, and after that the programme was vague.

Anyway, this elevator holdup was puttin' the crisscross on his plans something awful, and the longer it lasted the worse things was being mussed up.

And as there wa'n't room for more'n one steady conversation in that eight by ten car, the rest of us stood one side and played thinkin' parts. We gave Pierpont room to pace back

and forth, and every once in awhile, when he consulted his watch, we held our breath. Fin'lly, as it gets to be three o'clock and there's no signs of our being let out, he announces to Gladys that he's made up his mind to a new deal.

"Why not now," says he, "before we start?"

"To-day?" gasps Gladys.

"Yes, providing they ever get us out of this trap," says Pierpont. "There's a train at eight. We'll take that."

"But Mother?" says Gladys.

"She needn't know now," says Pierpont. "We can tell her later, when I come back after you. Come, what's the difference?"

Well, say, if their idea was that we couldn't guess what sort of move they was debatin', they didn't give us credit for being more'n half awake. As a rule folks don't plot out secret weddings so open, except on the stage; but this was a special occasion. Either they didn't care if we knew, or else they'd sized us up for dead wires. And I could see the Podunk lady gettin' int'rested by the minute.

"Well?" insists Pierpont, in that high handed way of his. "Why not?"

With her veil pushed back and her big brown eyes showin' how deep and serious she was takin' it, Gladys looked more human than she

had before. Nice girl she was too, and not more'n nineteen, I should judge. Anyway, she looked young.

"Why," says she, "why—I—I— Oh, Pierpont, I don't know what to say!"

With that she glances around, sort of helpless and appealin', until she comes to the lady sausage maker on the seat. She hadn't said a word, this party with the curls; but she'd leaned forward, and there was a kind of motherly, sympathizin' look on her homely face that you couldn't mistake. She'd forgot about how she'd been snubbed, and all that. She was just a woman watchin' a girl.

A whole minute, it seemed like, they held the pose, and then— Well, I don't know which of us was most jarred, me or Pierpont or the decorated Rube, but the next act is that all of a sudden Gladys digs up a deep sob, and then throws herself on her knees with her head in the Podunk lady's lap.

They're great on dippy moves, these high strung young ladies; but this was one of the quickest form reversals I'd ever seen. It only takes a second, though, for the Podunk party to get her breath.

"Yes, I know just how you feel, Deary," says she, pattin' Gladys on the shoulder. "I was your age myself once, and my Minnie'd been just about the same if she'd lived. That's

right, cry it out. You'll feel better after, and you'll know what you ought to do."

"Oh, but I don't know what to do!" sobs Gladys. "I don't, I don't! And I—I can't tell you about it!"

"There, there!" says the other. "I can, guess, Deary. He has to go away and leave you; so he wants to be married first and have you keep it quiet until he can come back. Ain't that it, now?"

"Ye-e-e-es," says Gladys. "And I would if it wasn't for hiding it from Mother. She has been on our side all along, you know, and I'm sure Father will come around in time, when he gets to know Pierpont better. I don't care so much about keeping it from him; but—but there's Mother."

"Yes, yes," says the Podunk lady. "I'm glad you feel that way about your mother, too. As long as you do, I guess you'll be all right. So don't worry."

"Oh, I say, Gladys!" protests Pierpont, who's been viewin' this new groupin' astonished and some indignant.

"Better let the women settle it their own way," says the sausage man, steppin' to the front and jerkin' his thumb at the clinched parties. "And have a cigar."

"Beg pardon," says Pierpont, drawin' himself up stiff, "but I don't know you, sir."

"I can fix that easy," says the other gent. "My name's Shaeffer, and that's Mrs. Shaeffer over there."

"Really?" says Pierpont sarcastic.

"If you've ever traveled much west of St. Jo," goes on Shaeffer, "you've seen the name plenty of times,—Shaeffer's Bread, that's us. Louisa and me, we started out twenty years ago to make the first hundred loaves of Shaeffer's bread. We hired a little store on a side street, did the baking ourselves, tended counter, and delivered in a basket. Maybe you wouldn't count it much to be proud of, but we made mighty good bread. If we hadn't, how could we sell out our chain of bakeries in seven cities, and get half a million just for the name and good will? Shaeffer's Bread, see? But we're through. I'm in mines now."

"Mines?" says Pierpont, straightenin' out the curl in his upper lip and gettin' some int'rested.

"Yes, sir," says Shaeffer. "Gold, silver, copper, zinc—I don't know what else. Some of 'em pay and some of 'em don't; but I guess the net income figures up on the right side. Shaeffer luck. Anyway, we ain't bothering. We've made up our minds just to travel around and enjoy ourselves. Ain't so much fun, after all, I tell Louisa. First time we've run up against

this, though," and he waves his hand at the blank elevator wall.

Meanwhile Mrs. Shaeffer and Gladys has been talkin' low and confidential, and just as Pierpont is acceptin' one of the ex-baker's cigars, Louisa breaks out with:

"Hey, Fritz, don't we own some of that June Bug stock?"

"Some!" says Fritz. "Why, we got control of that, Mother. Don't you remember? That's the mine Hank Nutter brought us the assay reports on, and we bought in so's to put him in charge. He's developin' that new lead, you know."

"I forgot," says Louisa; "but if Hank Nutter's in charge that makes it easy. You see, Fritz, this young man's just been hired as mining engineer there, and he's due to go to work at the June Bug next Monday morning. It's his first job since he left college, and if he makes good— Well, all this young lady's father has against him is that he's never done anything."

"Oh, he'll make good, all right," says Fritz. "I'll bank on that. Wants to get hooked up before he starts, does he? Well, why not?"

"Thank you," says Pierpont, shovin' out the grateful palm.

"Now you shut up, Fritz!" says Mrs. Shaeffer. "What do you know about such

things, anyway? Oh, you men! A runaway match kept secret is all right for you, of course; but what about the girl—and the girl's mother? Now Miss Gladys is thinking about her mother."

Well, it seemed Mother was visitin' in Buffalo. She'd never had any strong objection to Pierpont herself, but was only backin' Father's gen'ral proposition that a young college gent, even if he was due to inherit property, ought to make a showdown on the grub earnin' line before askin' any girl to marry him.

"But haven't I a year's contract?" says Pierpont. "Of course, the salary wouldn't be enough for us to live on in New York; but if Gladys will wait until—"

"Say," breaks in Fritz, "how would the young lady like a year at June Bug Camp? It ain't so rough, and there's a good frame house out there, and—"

"Oh, I'd love it," says Gladys, "if—if we could let Mother know beforehand."

"Why can't you?" says Mrs. Shaeffer. "Oh, the young man's job? Well, Fritz, you just wire out to Hank Nutter that the new engineer will be two or three days late, and to treat him right when he comes. That will give time for you young people to go up to Buffalo, fix it all up with Mother, and have a proper wedding."

"By George!" says Pierpont, real enthusiastic.

"Would you come with us?" asks Gladys, holding out both hands to Mrs. Shaeffer.

"Me?" says Louisa, reddenin' up. "Why, you wouldn't want anybody like us to—to—"

"We just would!" says Pierpont, cordial and hearty. "You're genuine bricks, and we should like nothing better than to—"

"H-e-e-e-e-y!" comes a voice bellowin' up the elevator shaft. "Why in blazes don't you bring that car down? Power's been on this five minutes."

At which silent Alfonso tears his eyes reluctant from page twenty-seven of the airship tale, piles off his stool, and grabs the startin' lever.

So it's three-forty-five when I drifts into the Corrugated and finds Piddie waitin' with one eye on the clock and a look of triumph on his face.

"Aha!" says he. "Just as I thought! I presume you have concocted some plausible excuse for this outrageous delay?"

"Sure thing," says I. "First off I was kidnaped by the city water department, and while that was takin' place I was entertained by seein' two of the upper clawsses revise their notions about a pair of full jeweled jays from the Middle West. Does that get by, or do I go

on the carpet for court martial before the real boss? "

" Humph! " says Piddie, turnin' on his heel and walkin' off.

And I bet he loses sleep to-night tryin' to figure out whether I'm guilty of mutiny, or was just slippin' over the usual josh.

CHAPTER XII

A LATE SCORE FOR VANDY

WELL, well! Am I a Mr. Fixit or not? Say, if you got any secret, gnawin' ambitions burnin' away under your vest, come around some afternoon when I ain't rushed, and I'll dope out a scheme for stencilin' your name on the walls of Fame so it'll look like a soap ad on a new barn.

Anyway, you can ask J. Vanderbeck Smith. Course, I'll admit part of that was due to a lucky break, and maybe I ain't got any cue to get chesty over it at all; but someway it tickles me a lot.

And you'd think, after takin' one glance at J. Vanderbeck, that he'd be the last man in the world to need a boost from anyone, let alone any such a two by four as me. Honest, he's so big and important lookin' that I ain't figured out even now how it was he ever escaped bein' made a Senator, or a General, or a life insurance president. You know—one of these deep chested, wide shouldered, heavyweight Adonis parties, with a big, serious face, and a ponderous, dignified way of movin' that almost makes

you hold your breath while he's passin' a given point. He's the kind of gent that folks will turn to gawp at in a crowd and ask each other who he is. Dresses the part well, too,—cream colored spats, frock coat, and silk tile, with a pink carnation always in his buttonhole.

Oh, he's a dream J. Vanderbeck Smith is, and when he shows up you look around to see where's the reception committee, or what's delayed the band. But, say, sad to relate, that's as far as it goes. J. Vanderbeck ain't even in the also-ran class. He ain't so much as a has-been. He's a never-waser. Uh-huh! Took me a long time to get over the shock myself, and I had to have it straight from headquarters before I'd believe it.

"Say, Mr. Ellins," says I, rushin' into the private office the first time J. Vanderbeck dropped into the Corrugated after I'd been put on the gate, "I guess the main guy himself has come to town. Here's his card. Incog, ain't he?"

And Old Hickory, after glancin' at the name, only laughs and says, "Oh, Vandy Smith! Well, I'm not busy just now. You may let him in."

Course, that should have been enough to give me his number; but, believe me, it was months before I could get over the habit of jumpin' up and throwin' the gate wide open when he stalks

in. When I discovers, though, that Vandy's only a dummy director, shoved into the board on the strength of his holdin' a small block of shares and bein' a kind of third cousin to Mr. Ellins, I begins to get wise to what a joke he is.

Seems that J. Vanderbeck's steady job in life is to draw quarterly dividends, serve on club committees, and keep his tailor busy. Along with the name of Smith he'd inherited a tin box in some safety deposit vaults, and he'd let it go at that.

Near as I could figure out, work and him was total strangers, and so far as I could see his life was about as useful and animated as if he'd been a potted palm in some hotel lobby. After I got to know him well I used to wonder if he had any real thoughts, and what they was like.

But, say, you can't always tell, can you? Here the other forenoon Vanderbeck surprises me by showin' up at the Corrugated about ten o'clock, and I'd never known him to drift in earlier than eleven-thirty before.

"Tut, tut!" says I. "Beatin' the time-card, ain't you? Or is it just a case of stayin' up so late it was too early to go to bed?"

"Beastly fire next door to the club," says he. "Routed me out, you know. Mr. Ellins down?"

"Nix," says I. "He's a little behind schedule; but I'm goin' to give him ten minutes

more before I dock him. Maybe you'd better walk in and take charge until he comes, Mr. Smith."

"Ah, thanks," says Vandy, never even crackin' a smile.

Not that I was wastin' all this josh on him; for I'd tried out Vandy's sense of humor before, and knew that where the funny bump ought to be there was a hollow you could lay an egg in. I was just shootin' it out for the benefit of Piddie, who was flubbin' around with his ear stretched, as usual. And when Piddie hears me invite Vandy to take charge of the business he gasps so you could hear him all over the shop.

We was just in the midst of a lovely debate, Piddie and me, and he was handin' out a line of reproof that should have had me hangin' my head and chewin' my tongue, I expect; only it didn't, for I was just suggestin' that if he knew as much about his job as he thought he did about mine, they ought to double his salary —when the door is yanked open and slammed shut again, and in pads Old Hickory, his eyes blazin' sparks and his fists doubled, and his neck and ears about the color of a bunch of grapes.

"Boy!" he roars. "Go down in the arcade and find that special officer! Bring him up here at once!"

"Yes, Sir," says I, jumpin' lively. "Need the reg'lar cop out front too, Sir?"

"No, Daley will do," he snaps. "Tell him I'll make the charge. I've been followed, threatened, insulted! The scoundrel's waiting outside! Quick, now!"

"Right, Sir," says I, slidin' through the door and makin' such a dash for the elevator that I bunks into a short, thick set party good and hard.

"Oh, you will, will you?" says he, and the next thing I knows I'm about to get a solid lookin' leather covered box a foot square swung at my head. But my luck still held. The swing was never finished. Instead, the gent puts down the box and gawps at me astonished.

"Well, I'll be ditched!" says he. "Torchy!"

"Gee!" says I. "Snap Collins! But why the assault and battery motions?"

"Took you for the official bouncer making a flying tackle," says he. "What's the rush order, anyway?"

"Cop!" says I, steppin' over to press the button. "Ah, where's that car in No. 4 chute? Hey, up there on Floor 22! Think I'm ringin' this bell just to hear the tinkle? Wake up!"

"Cop, eh?" says Snap. "Who's the plaintiff?"

"The big boss, Mr. Ellins," says I. "Case

of sandbaggin', or something like that. Say, what you grinnin' at, Snap?"

"Nothing much," says he; "only it's for me you're collecting the cop. That's funny, ain't it?"

"Go on!" says I. "What could you be doin' to—" And then I got a glimmer. "Honest, Snap," I goes on, "was that all? Just tryin' to mug him?"

"That's the whole of it," says Snap. "And I was conducting the negotiations as polite and genteel as I knew how, with him dodging around and cussing me like I was some strong arm artist trying to lift his leather. My! but some of these plutes are peevish! And now he wants me pinched, eh? Well, go on, Torchy. My people will get me out by night, I guess, if they aren't too busy. Blaze away!"

"You was doin' it on order, I expect, eh, Snap?" says I, wavin' for the elevator to go on down.

"Sure," says he. "A *must*, too. Got to get the negative in for the afternoon editions."

"What's the scandal?" says I.

"It's in all the morning papers," says he. "Your boss has turned down a subpœna from the Senate's special investigating committee—told 'em to go plump to blazes. So all the city editors in town are howling for a double column of his map to go on the front page. I've

been laying for him for two hours; but all I've accumulated so far is a quarter view of him getting out of the limousine. He was onto me, though, and proceeds to raise a riot. But it's funny you should be the one to go for the cop. Well?"

There it was, batted up to me fair and square. And, say, if it had been any other camera juggler in the business, I wouldn't have hung back a minute. But Snap Collins! Why, we used to be on the Sunday edition together, and it was him stood off that crazy Ed Miller, who wanted to choke me for losin' a page of his bloomin' copy. Just swung up a wooden bottomed desk chair, Snap did, and advised Miller if he didn't want an extra crack or two in his skull to keep his hands off. And Miller weighin' a hundred and ninety-five and assistant Sunday editor besides! Course, Snap got the chuck for that, and all I could do was grind my teeth at Miller every time he went by.

"What's the use, Snap?" says I. "You know I ain't sickin' any cops onto you. Wait here a minute."

With that I goes back through the gen'ral offices and into Old Hickory's private room.

"Did you get Daley?" says he.

"I didn't try," says I.

"Eh? What's that?" he snorts. "You didn't—"

"I can't, Mr. Ellins," says I. "That picture man out there is Snap Collins, and he's a friend of mine."

"Ha! He is, eh?" bellows Old Hickory, and for a second or two the way he glares at me gives me chills down the back. Honest, I've had to bluff through lively scenes now and then, and once or twice I've been so scared inside it's a wonder I didn't turn a permanent pea green; but I never felt my knees quite so wabbly before.

I should have known better, though. Old Hickory ain't any welsher himself, and the few friends he has he sticks by through thick and thin. So after that first blast he simmers down a little, and pretty quick he gives them heavy shoulders of his a sudden hunch.

"Huh!" he growls. "Then under those circumstances, I suppose, I must—well, send in Mr. Piddie."

"Thanks, Mr. Ellins," says I. "I knew you'd see how it was. And if you'll excuse my sayin' so, it ain't any use to go on. Snap Collins is bound to get you."

"Eh?" says Old Hickory. "Do you mean to tell me, Boy, that I must submit to being photographed by any scousy, low browed, snooping footpad who takes it into his head to—"

"Say," I breaks in, "you don't get the idea.

Mr. Ellins. Snap don't want your portrait to put over his mantel, or to wear in a locket. And he ain't out on any picnic excursion, either. It's his job. And behind him is every newspaper in town, and papers in a thousand other towns, all howlin' for a picture of you. Snap ain't to blame for that. He's just out earnin' his board money, same as most of us is. And in his way he's a hummer, too."

"Really?" remarks Old Hickory, liftin' his eyebrows sarcastic.

"That's what!" says I. "Maybe he ain't very ornamental or imposin' to look at, and you wouldn't want to know a milder or cheerfuller party when he's off duty; but, say, send him out with a seven by nine and orders to bring back so and so, and I want to tell you that Snap Collins'll face anything, from machine guns to grizzly bears. He'll rush that camera of his into the thick of a strike riot where they're usin' brickbats and nightsticks reckless, or he'll smuggle it into a cathedral and take a flashlight of a pontifical mass without any permit. And smooth! Well, who else could have talked Hetty Green into givin' a private sitting but him?"

"So I suppose," comments Old Hickory, "that I should allow him to hold me up right on Broadway and take my picture, eh?"

"Didn't he say anything about coming up?" says I.

"Didn't he?" snarls Mr. Ellins. "I should say he did! Had the confounded impudence to suggest that I let him take me at my desk—here, in my private office!"

"Well, that's the way he gen'rally works it," says I. "He'll make a good one, too. And if you don't let him do that he'll have to turn in a chance shot, and they'll throw it up to four times the size in the office, and paint out the background, and line in the eyes, and by the time they get through they'll have something that'll look a little like you, but more like an exhibit from the morgue. But they'll print it, from here to Texas and back again, with your name under it."

And I will say this for Old Hickory, that for all his tabasco temper and chesty ways, he don't go around with his ears plugged. He ain't so old and so high and mighty but what he's willin' to take a hunch now and then. He was listenin' now, too.

"Rather a convincing presentation of the case, young man," says he. "Still, it almost seems that, if I can defy the Congress of the United States, I ought to have enough backbone to—"

"Ah, it ain't a case of backbone," says I. "Course, I don't know what them dubs in Con-

gress will do; but you can bank on one thing,—Snap Collins never reports back without some kind of a negative."

"And what do you advise, then?" says Mr. Ellins, winkin' facetious at J. Vanderbeck, who's lookin' wise and distinguished over by the window.

"Why," says I, "have him in and get it over with. So long as you've got to go on exhibition, you might as well have something printed that won't scare the children. If you say so, I'll have him rush the job through."

"Well, well!" sighs Old Hickory, throwin' up his hands. "Do it, then. Bring on Collins the Undefeated. I can't promise to suspend work, and if he doesn't clear out inside of five minutes I may throw him through the door. With that understanding, let him in."

All this time I hadn't been noticin' J. Vanderbeck much. I'd just caught a glimpse of him over the desk, listenin' int'rested. But when I'd towed Snap in, and was whisperin' to him urgent to shake things up, I notices Vandy edgin' over into the center of the stage.

"Excuse me," says Snap, wavin' him off, "but I'm about to make an exposure."

"Oh, certainly," says Vandy, backin' away sort of flustered. "Of course you don't want me in the picture."

"Well, this isn't a group, you know," says

Snap. "Now, if you'll hold that just a second, Mr. Ellins—thanks. All over. And I'm much obliged, Sir."

"Get out!" growls Old Hickory. And with a grateful grin my way Snap does a quick exit.

"There, Vandy!" says Mr. Ellins. "You see what we're coming to,—mob rule, with the yellow press urging on the rabble. And I've always sworn they should never have my picture to print!"

"They don't bother me much for mine," remarks Vandy. And, would you believe it, he heaves a deep sigh as he says it?

"Yours!" remarks Old Hickory, crisp and cuttin'. "Now, that's odd, isn't it?" He throws it off careless, without meanin' much, I expect; but it's the one jab I ever saw get through Vandy's skin. You could see him wince under it, and some of the color fades out of his face.

"Oh, I know!" says he husky and bitter. "I'm a nobody! I've fooled away my life sitting around clubs and taking things easy. I'm a bluff, that's all. And I had a better chance than you did at the start, Dave Ellins. Perhaps that was the trouble. I didn't have to do things, and you did. And now they wouldn't print my picture if I paid them for doing it, while you're known from one end of the coun-

try to the other, and they send men chasing you with cameras!"

Old Hickory stares at him from under the bushy eyebrows for a minute, sort of astonished and puzzled, and then he remarks, as soothin' as he knows how, "There, there, Vandy! Perhaps you haven't missed so much, after all."

"But you don't know what it is to be—the other thing," says J. Vanderbeck, chokin' up and startin' for the door.

And Old Hickory only shrugs his shoulders. "Huh!" he grunts. "I thought I knew all there was to know of Vandy, too! Here, Boy, take these to the bond room."

Looked like another odd meeting-up when that same afternoon Mr. Robert sends me up to the Ellins house for something he'd forgot and I finds Snap Collins once more, settin' up his tripod just across the street. But it wa'n't any miracle.

"Got to have a picture of the Ellins mansion for the morning editions," explains Snap, screwin' on the big plate camera. "And, say, Torchy, this is the part of the game that gets my goat."

"Why, this ought to be a cinch," says I.

"That's it," says Snap. "Any fool reporter could do this well enough. But no, they must send me packing up here with this sixty-

pound gallery outfit. I'm no truck horse, you know. Now, I don't mind trailing down people like Mr. Ellins,—there's some sport in that,—but this sort of thing! Bah!"

"Gee, Snap!" says I. "I never knew you was a grouch. Have you told 'em at the shop?"

"Have I?" says he. "For the last three years I've been at the Syndicate to give me a chance at outside work. I should have been in on that Mexican muss. Say, I'd have sent in some pictures that were pictures! And look what I've missed by not being over there in North Africa, or China! What have we been getting from that China affair, anyway? A lot of long range amateur stuff not worth cutting column rules for. Say, I'd like to show 'em some real war pictures. I'd get in behind the guns, and show 'em the smoke, and the blood, and heaps of dead. But instead of that I'm kept plugging around New York, taking fire pictures, and doing such work as this. And they won't even let me sign my stuff, either!"

"Sign it!" says I.

"Why not?" demands Snap. "Any mutt of a third rate magazine illustrator has his autograph scrawled on every bum picture he draws, don't he? And the punk story writers get their names printed, too. But me, after I've spent years learning how to make a good news picture under any conditions and in any

light, and maybe risked my neck to get where I could press the bulb, I'm not even allowed to scratch my initials on the plate. Bah! I could ring in more coin running a postcard joint down at Coney Island. Now watch me shoot the Ellins mansion! Thrilling cut this is going to make, too—just a bare house. Not even anybody to stand on the front steps."

And just as Snap growls that out I sees a familiar figure stroll out of the swell clubhouse on the corner.

"Would it help havin' someone on the steps?" says I.

"Of course it would," says he, "if it was someone that looked as though they belonged there."

"Then wait a minute," says I. "I think I can play this two ways and let you both win. Hey, Mr. Smith!"

Sure, it was Vandy I'd spotted. No, he didn't mind at all posin' on the Ellins' front steps. All he was curious about was to know where the picture might be printed.

"Oh, in a couple of hundred papers, all over," says Snap. "And it adds a lot, Mr. Smith, to have someone in the foreground; gives the human touch, you know."

"I see," says Vandy. "Now, how will this do—so?"

And, say, when I left they was gettin' real

chummy. I had to grin, too, when I see the cuts in the mornin' papers; for there's J. Vanderbeck Smith, lookin' handsome and distinguished, on all the front pages.

"Well, he's got his wish at last!" thinks I.

But that ain't all. Almost every day since then he's been appearin',—now loomin' up in the front row of a crowd inspectin' some fire ruins, then showin' in the corner of a group surroundin' some distinguished foreign visitor, and the next formin' part of the background in a scene where the President is layin' a cornerstone.

Talk about bein' well advertised! Why, there's only a few patent medicine doctors and grand opera stars that's got anything on Vandy. I got so excited over it yesterday, when he figures in two diff'rent pictures, that I has to call Snap Collins up over the 'phone and ask him about it.

"Got it, did you?" says Snap gleeful. "Say, they're all getting on. And it's working fine. They've given me that foreign commission, Torchy. We're starting abroad for the scene of conflict next Wednesday."

"What we?" says I.

"Why, me and Mr. Smith," says Snap.

"Vandy?" says I. "What's he goin' for?"

"Why, because he likes it, for one thing," says Snap. "He's going to write a book about

it, I guess. Besides, I need him. He's my signature, you know."

And, say, if that ain't passin' two through on the same rain check, what is, eh? But workin' in Vandy as a sig! That gets me!

CHAPTER XIII

TORCHY'S BONEHEAD HUNCH

"AH! what do you want for eight per, a special ambassador?" That and other remarks along the same line was what I had a good notion to hand Mr. Robert—only I didn't. And, as it turned out, I didn't have to.

You see, it was all on account of his allowin' business to interfere with his social duties. So right in the middle of a busy forenoon, while he was dictatin' letters and signin' documents and keepin' a directors' meeting waitin', he suddenly runs across something in the mornin' mail that makes him drop everything else and press the buzzer for me.

"Yes, Sir?" says I, slidin' in and winkin' respectful at the lady stenographer, who's got her pencil in the air.

"Torchy," says he, "what do you know about buying a christening present for a baby?"

"Not a blamed thing," says I.

"I can hardly believe it," says he. "Why, I supposed there was no department of human knowledge in which you were not—but never

mind that now. I want you to go out and buy one."

"Yes, Sir," says I, givin' the prompt salute.

"Ah-h-h!" says he, sighin' relieved. "That's the way to talk! It's for the Kent-Jackson baby. There's the address, here's a twenty-dollar bill, and"—business with the fountain pen—"here's a card with my compliments. The christening is at five this afternoon. You get that present there before three, anyway."

"Sure thing," says I, gatherin' in the twenty and the card and startin' out.

"But, I say, Torchy," says he, just as I'm closin' the door, "what do you think of getting?"

"Ain't thought yet," says I. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Boy," says he.

"Cinch!" says I. "Gold mounted silk suspenders."

The lady stenographer gasps and near has a chokin' fit.

"Well?" says Mr. Robert to her. "Any suggestions?"

"Isn't it the proper thing," says she, "to send a silver mug, or a—"

"Mug it is," says Mr. Robert. "Hear that, Torchy? Well, get a good one. Have it engraved K-J, and don't deliver it to a servant,

who might mislay it. Give it to Mrs. Kent-Jackson herself."

"I get you," says I, makin' a break before he can mess up the sailin' orders with more details; and, without stoppin' to ease Mr. Piddie's mind as to why I'm quittin' before lunch, I beats it for the express elevator.

Course, I'm wise as to why Mr. Robert is in such a sweat to get that baby present in on time. It's plain he's forgot all about this christenin' stunt, and the baby too, most likely; and it happens that Mr. T. Kent-Jackson, besides bein' one of our big customers, is a club chum of his. So it would be a bad break for him to pass up the young heir that way. Hence the call for fair haired Claude to come to the rescue.

Never havin' shopped much for baby mugs, I wa'n't dead sure just where to begin; but I takes a chance on the biggest jew'lry store I can find on Fifth-ave. And, say, it was easy! Why, in no time at all I'm up on the second floor and a nice, smooth talkin' young Charley-clerk is showin' me cases full of nothing but silver things.

"How about this?" says I, pointin' to a three-handled affair.

"Very superior article," says he. "It can be used either as a loving cup or as a stein, and—"

"Take it away," says I. "Did I ask for beer steins? Show me just mugs."

"Oh, certainly," says he, crisp and pettish, like his feelin's had been hurt.

But I had no time to waste on soothin' him down. Besides, I'd got my eye on something that just seemed to fill the bill. It's a gold lined silver mug with a cute little shelf effect on the inside, sort of a strainer, I judged, and I puts the tag on that. The duffer made me hang around an hour while he put through a rush order on the old English initials; but about half-past eleven I've got the thing all done up in a nice satin box and am under way for the Kent-Jacksons.

And, say, I knew how he'd been comin' to the front these last few years, as a promoter of the steamship pool and all that; but I sure wa'n't lookin' to find him spread out in such a swell tent as this double-breasted mansion on Riverside Drive. It's a reg'lar brewer's palace, with an iron grill across the front door like the entrance to a bank vault. The butler that answers my ring is most as imposin' as the house, and the minute he cops the package under my arm he begins sputterin' and wavin' me to the rear.

"Ah, pickle that, old Sideboards!" says I. "This ain't a case of tradespeople to the back door; it's a special messenger with a christen-

in' gift to be delivered. Does that sink in?"

It don't. I could see that by the blank look on his face.

"Here, then," I goes on, fishin' Mr. Robert's card out of my pocket, "lug that in to Mrs. Kent-Jackson and tell her how Sunny Haired Hank waits below!"

Honest, if I was hirin' a butler, I'd pick one with less beef and more brains. He reads the card all through, turns it upside down, examines the back, and then goes off, leavin' me outside standin' on a rubber mat that has "Welcome" worked into it in four-inch letters. Seemed like I stood there half an hour, though maybe it was less; but when old Solid Ivory shows up again he swings the door wide open.

"Beg pardon, Sir," says he. "You're to step in."

"I will if my feet ain't froze to the mat," says I. "Where do I find the lady?"

He bows real humble and explains how Mrs. Kent-Jackson begs me to wait in the lib'ry until she has finished superintendin' the young master's bath.

"It may be half an hour, Sir," says he; "not more than three-quarters, at most. She's very sorry, Sir."

"All right," says I. "Tell her not to weep in the tub."

And with that he leads me through a big hall

lined with tin armor and marble statuary, into a big room all done in stained oak and red leather, after which he marches off with his nose in the air.

I'd only tried three of the chairs, and was tryin' to puzzle out what the picture over the fireplace was meant for, when I hears stealthy footsteps comin' through the conservatory on the left, and I swings around, to discover a little, dried up old gent doin' the sleuthy sneak through the room.

By the gumshoe tread and the black leatherette bag he carries, I might have put him down as a daylight second story worker makin' off with the fam'ly jewels; but the Rube costume he's wearin' and the mild, gentle, old blue eyes don't tally with that description at all. With the funny, back number, short tailed cutaway, the low cut celluloid collar, and the big silver watch chain, he sure was a queer lookin' gink to be wanderin' around in a flossy ranch like that.

He has his old slouch hat in his hand, and he's gazin' around admirin' at the pictures and furniture. First off he don't see me, and as he passes one of them big easy chairs he stops, sets his bag down, and tests the cushions cautious with one hand. He was just rubbin' his fingers sort of caressin' over the smooth leather when something makes him turn his head and he gets his lamps on me.

"H'm, excuse me," says he, startin' back guilty and grabbin' up his bag.

"Don't mention it," says I. "I'm buttin' in too. Mug for the youngster. What you deliverin', Uncle?"

"Me?" says he. "Why—why, nothing. I've been sort of stopping here."

"Sounds fishy, Uncle," says I; "but maybe you'll get away with it. You don't mean to throw the bluff you're visitin' the Kent-Jacksons?"

"Why, yes," says he: "that is, I was. I'm Pa Jackson."

"What!" says I. "Father of T. Kent-Jackson?"

"Tommy's my boy," says he. "And, say, this is quite a house he's got, eh?"

"It's a classy wigwam, all right," says I.

"Seen the things in the front hall, them suits of armor and the statues?" says he.

"I got a glimpse as I come through," says I.

"There's more in the dining room," says he, "and oil paintings everywhere. Cost a lot of money, all them things; but I guess Tommy can afford 'em. Yes, yes. I suppose I ought to be going, though."

"What, before the doin's this afternoon?" says I.

"That christening's what I came on for,"

says he, "all the way from Manistee; but—but I've changed my mind about staying."

There's a kind of break in his voice as he says this, and the faded old blue eyes sort of dims up; so I suspects there's something more he ain't told.

"Why, that's too bad, ain't it?" says I. "Business draggin' you back?"

"No, it ain't that," says he, settlin' down easy on the chair arm. "It's on account of this Lady Collamer."

"Who's she, mother-in-law?" says I.

"Aunt," says he, "to Tommy's wife. Come unexpected yesterday from England. How's that, eh? Maybe you didn't know Tommy's wife had such high flown relations? I didn't myself until here the other day. Course, I knew she was English, and that Tommy met her while he was over there on business; but I didn't dream he'd married into the nobility, as you might say, until I heard about Lady Collamer. Say, but they're a mighty stiff necked lot, ain't they?"

"So I've heard," says I. "But what about you and the old girl? Didn't hit it off well at first, eh?"

"Lordy, no!" says Pa Jackson. "I tried to be real sociable too; but, as usual, first time I opened my mouth I put my foot in it. That was when we was introduced."

"What sort of a break did you make?" says I.

"Why," says he, chucklin' quiet, "I got the name twisted. 'Lady Cucumber, is it?' says I. 'Colla-mer,' says she, 'not Cucumber.' And by the time she'd got through staring at me through them long handled gold specs of hers I was shriveled up to most nothing at all."

Seems Pa Jackson was just achin' to confide in someone, and he was lettin' loose on me. He says while his son Tommy was around he felt more or less to home, and had meant to stick it out for a few days, in spite of Lady Collamer. But he'd been up ever since five o'clock that mornin', roamin' around the house dodgin' the servants and dreadin' to meet the old girl again, and it had just naturally got on his nerves. At last he decides he can't stand it any longer; so he'd packed his things and was takin' one final look around Son Tommy's big house when he runs across me.

"Course," he says, "I don't know what Tommy will think, my slipping off this way; but I guess it's best. I ain't much on style, and this Lady Collamer's a mighty grand sort of person, I tell you! What she thinks of me, I wouldn't dare to guess, and even if I hadn't called her Lady Cucumber, I expect— Oh, Lordy! here she comes now!"

He'd heard the rustle of stiff silk and the

heavy step on the hardwood floor as soon as I had, and he'd grabbed his bag and hat before you could think twice. But at that he was too late; for there, loomin' up solid and massive between the draperies, is a fat, purple faced old party with a hard, cold look in her eyes, gazin' at us stern and disapprovin'. Under one arm she's luggin' a fat, wheezy, little old pug dog, and as she reaches for her lorgnette she drops him on the floor. Pa Jackson stands there starin' at her with his mouth half open, like he'd been hypnotized.

"Ugh!" says she, takin' a squint at him. "That odious person again!"

"Yes'm," says he, bowin' awkward.

"Humph!" she snorts; and then, turnin' to me, she snaps out, "Who are you, pray?"

"Guilty," says I. "I mean I'm just Torchy. Honest, Lady, I don't belong to the fam'ly. I'm waitin' to leave a christenin' present for the kid."

"Kid!" she gasps. "Another odious person."

"Yep," says I, "number two."

"Humph!" she snorts again, and with that she sails between us towards the conservatory, the fat pug wheezin' along behind.

Where the Boston bull terrier had been concealed all this time I expect I'll never know; but he must have been on the scent and layin'

for puggy, for all of a sudden he scoots through on the jump, lands on the pug with all four feet and his mouth open, and for the next few seconds the lib'ry was an excitin' place. There was growls from the terrier, and howls and ki-yi's and toenail scratchin' by the pug, with Lady Collamer squealin' for help and hoppin' round wringin' her hands.

Being right on the spot, it was up to me and Pa Jackson; and I must say that the calm way the old gent dove in and grabbed the terrier by the neck was all to the scientific. Between my pullin' away at the pug, and Pa Jackson's pryin' open the terrier's teeth with his fingers, the heroic rescue was made in record time.

Having his fun spoiled in that fashion made the Boston bull some ugly, and he starts in to chew up the old sport's wrist. But Pa Jackson was a dog tamer from up the creek. He proceeds to shake off the pup, and as he drops him he executes as neat a kick as if he was a star punter on some college eleven. And by the time the yelps had died out as the terrier gets nearer the attic, and the butler and three maids has been sent to lock him up, and the pug has been restored to the protectin' arms of Lady Collamer, the old girl was ready to extend her vote of thanks. There's no denyin', too, but that she did it generous and handsome.

"And so," she says, after that's off her

mind, "you are the father of Evelyn's husband, are you?"

"Yes, Lady Cu-Cull—" begins Pa Jackson, tryin' to make a society bow and get the name straight at the same time.

"Collamer," says she, helpin' him out. "And for Heaven's sake stop bobbing your head that way! Sit down, too, both of you."

Well, we sat, Pa Jackson only venturin' to squat on the edge of his chair, and still holdin' his hat.

"Now tell me, Mr. Jackson," says she, "why you are mooning about the house with that traveling bag? You were not thinking of leaving before the christening ceremony, were you?"

"Why—er—ye-e-es," says Pa Jackson.

"What!" she explodes, glarin' at him.

"No, no; not at all," says he. "I was—er—that is—"

"Ah, back up!" says I, breakin' in. "You know you were beating it; you told me so."

"Ah—ha!" says she. "And for what reason, I should like to know?"

Pa Jackson glances at me reproachful and makes a stagger at explainin'. "Why," he goes on, "I thought I might as well clear out now. I only came on for a short stop, you know, and—well, the fact is, I ought to be getting back to Manistee."

"Humph!" says Lady Collamer. "I don't believe a word of it! Boy, do you know anything more?"

"Sure!" says I. "It was a case of cold feet."

"Cold feet!" says she. "Meaning what, now?"

"Why, you had him scared stiff, that's all," says I, "and, as long as you've put me on the stand, I might as well say that it don't strike me as a square deal. He's the youngster's grandfather, ain't he? And it seems he ought to cut some figure at the christenin'."

"Quite right," says the old lady. "So he shall. I mean to attend to that myself. First of all, though, we must get better acquainted. Tell me about your son."

"About Tommy?" says Pa Jackson.

"Certainly," says Lady Collamer. "To be sure, he's an American; but I like him very much. He seems to be a manly, capable young fellow."

"Tommy always was a good boy," says Pa Jackson, brushin' his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Was he born out there in—in that unheard of place where you live?" says Lady Collamer.

"Tommy?" says Pa Jackson. "Why, no, Tommy was born right in New York. You know, I was in business here myself once; same

line too, steamship agent. We were doing well, and I was planning some day to have a nice home,—maybe not quite so fine as this, but almost, for we were making money fast in those days,—when something happened that ended it all."

"Yes?" says Lady Collamer. "Go on."

"It's a matter I ain't talked much about for a good many years," says Pa Jackson. "But I had a partner, a young Englishman, bright and smart and good natured. I thought as much of him as if he'd been a brother. It was making money so fast that spoiled him. He wanted to spend his share as it came in,—fine clothes, fast horses, wine, and all the rest. He got in with a bad lot. I didn't know how bad they were, though, until late one night when he staggered into my front door with a bullet in his shoulder. That wa'n't the worst, either. He said he'd killed a man. There had been a row in a gambling place. He'd been shot, and he'd shot back. And before morning he told me the rest. He'd lost a lot of money, and a good deal of it was mine. Well, what could I do? He was like a brother to me, mind you. I kept him under cover, the wife and I nursed him until he was well enough to travel, and then I put him aboard a steamer for England. And, after all, as it turned out, the other fellow got well too. But our business had gone to smash.

I took what was left, and with little Tommy and his mother we went West. I've been there ever since, working and scraping to give Tommy the chance I had once. Tommy's had it, and he's made good too. So I'm satisfied."

Say, that was some of a yarn to dig up from a quiet little old chap like Pa Jackson! I'd been followin' it so close too, that I hadn't noticed how Lady Collamer was takin' it until just at the finish I glanced over to see her with her hands grippin' the chair arms and a diff'rent look in her eyes.

"This young Englishman's name," says she, "was it Kendall?"

"Why, yes," says he. "Bryce Kendall. You didn't happen to know him, did you?"

"I did," says she. "That was my son's name before he came into the title and became Lord Collamer. And if you are the Thomas Jackson named in his will, there is still held in trust for you the estate of Chipping Sodbury in Devonshire."

"Well, well!" says Pa Jackson. "Left me a place over there, did he?"

"The finest in the county," says Lady Collamer. "I trust you will go back with me and occupy it. It adjoins mine, and I'm sure I should like you for a neighbor."

"Why, thank you," says Pa Jackson, "that's mighty nice of you to say, and I guess

you and I'd get along as neighbors first rate, after all. But Manistee's more my style. In fact, the train I was thinking of taking leaves in about—"

"Thomas Jackson," says Lady Collamer, "put—down—that—bag! I'm going to have a talk with Evelyn about you and— Why, here she is now!"

Well, say, as it was past my lunch hour, and as I wa'n't strictly in this fam'ly love feast, I hands over the package to Mrs. Kent-Jackson and slides out to where the fat butler was waitin' to shoo me through the door. And at two-fifteen I presents Mr. Robert with the receipt I'd made the jewl'ry clerk give me.

"Here, Torchy," he sings out, "what does this mean?"

"Price ticket on the christenin' present," says I. "And here's the change. Ain't it right?"

"Right!" he howls. "Why, you scarlet topped young imp, you've made me send a silver shaving mug to a three-months-old baby!"

"Gee!" says I. "So that shelf was for soap, was it? Well, maybe he'll grow to it, seein' he's a boy."

Which may disguise, but don't work any revise on the fact that I'm in bad with Mr. Robert, just the same. And it lasts until he blows in from luncheon next day. Instead of his

slammin' the gate and rushin' past my desk, though, I looks up to find him standin' there grinnin' at me amiable.

"I've been having a talk with Kent-Jackson, Torchy," says he.

"Uh-huh?" says I. "Sore about the shavin' mug, was he?"

"Hardly," says Mr. Robert. "He thinks you're a wonder-something about the way you smoothed matters out between his old dad, whom he thinks a heap of, and his wife's aunt. Now just how did you manage it?"

"Me?" says I. "Why, it was the old gent himself, tellin' the story of his life without waitin' for the music cue. All I did was mix in a little at the start. Honest, it was Pa Jackson got the good hunch."

CHAPTER XIV

CATCHING A SIGNAL

And I thought I was some shunter, too. Why, that very mornin' I'd given the run to four or five smooth conversers that had tried to get through the brass gate, each with his own private earache to deliver to Old Hickory or Mr. Robert. I'd sifted 'em out from a lot of people that had a right to get by, and I was feelin' puffed up and chesty over the way I'd done it.

Yet look how Lola rushes me off my feet at the first whirl. You see, I was busy just then exchangin' a few kiddin' remarks with one of the lady typists across the office, and I had my back to the door; when all of a sudden there comes this swishy, rustlin' noise, and I looks up, to have my eyes dazzled by a vision in lemon yellow.

Talk about your poster effects! Say, here was a female party about seventeen hands high, the same width all the way up and down, and costumed in that new shade that looks like the inside of a squash pie, with a smashin' big yellow straw lid on top of a lot of benzine blonde hair. Maybe it wa'n't some brilliant color

scheme, too! She has a reg'lar giraffe neck, and one of these long meatax faces with pale green eyes,—a face that you could see once and then wake up out of a sound sleep a month later and remember accurate.

Jarred? Say, believe me, I didn't know whether it was really so, or if I'd gone color blind all to once! But before I has time to make up my mind she has sprung the gate catch, walked in, and is snuggled up close pattin' me on the shoulder.

"Tell me, my dear little fellow," says she, lettin' it come out cooin' and gurgly, "is Robert—er—young Mr. Ellins, you know—is he in?"

"Mr. Robert?" says I, gawpin' up at her with my mouth open, "why—I—I better take in your name, I guess, Miss."

"Oh, no, no! Let's not do that," says she, slippin' her arm around my neck and cuddlin' me up real impetuous. "It will be so delicious to surprise him at his desk, don't you see? I want to know just how he looks that way, when he's expecting no one. Come! *Allons nous!* The surprise!"

And the next thing I know I'm on my feet, and she's huggin' me up with one of them long yellow arms, and I'm bein' paraded past a whole line of grinnin' typewriter girls, bang up to the door of Mr. Robert's private office and

through it, without makin' so much as a struggle. Foolish? Why, say, a kitten with his feet stuck in flypaper couldn't have felt worse!

But, silly as I must have looked, with her still holdin' the clinch, that wa'n't a marker to the flat expression that spreads over Mr. Robert's face when he swings around and sees us. We'd pulled off the surprise, all right; but whether he really did think of crawlin' under the desk or jumpin' for the fire escape, I couldn't make out.

"Why, Miss MacIntosh!" he gasps.

"Oh, Robert!" says she, reprovin'. "After I had told you that you might call me Lola, too!"

"Ah—er—yes, that's so," says he. And then turnin' to me sharp, "Torchy, you may send in Mr. Piddie. At once, understand!"

"Yes, Sir, right away, Sir," says I, squirmin' loose and makin' my escape. I didn't lose any time in findin' Piddie, either. "Piddie," says I, "did you see it?"

"The tall young lady in yellow?" says he.

"Uh-huh," says I. "Chase in; it's your turn to get hugged."

Whether she passed it as far as Piddie or not, I can't say; but it was half an hour before Lola shows up again, and on her way out she stops to hand me a partin' squeeze.

"You dear boy!" she cooes. "I've been hearing all about you from Robert."

"Huh!" says I. "Don't swallow it all. He's a kidder, Mr. Robert is."

"A what?" says Lola. "But, there, I mustn't stay now. You're coming up to see me sometime, you know, and we're to have a nice long chat. Meanwhile I am going to give you one of my little books, and when I see you again you must tell me how you like it. *Au revoir,* Torchy."

And out she floats, leavin' me gazin' at a dinky little affair bound in white and gold, with this on the cover:

LILTINGS

by

LOLA MacINTOSH

"Gee!" thinks I. "What's 'Liltings'?" With that I opens her up and strikes this sample!

Two gray gulls wheel
In the gray, gray sky—
Soar on, O soul of mine!
For he comes, he comes,
And the dawn is nigh,
And he is wholly thine.

I'd just gone over it for the second time, tryin' to find out what it was all about, when

out comes Mr. Robert, flushed up sort of grouchy and sheepish.

"Look!" says I, exhibitin' the book. "Honest graft."

"I know," says he, sighin' weary. "She never misses a chance."

"Well, that's one way of boomin' a circulation," says I. "But, say, I never knew lady poets was such chummy parties."

"Then you've added that much to your stock of wisdom," says Mr. Robert. "But why in the name of all that's great, young man, did you rush her into my office without warning?"

"Who, me?" says I. "Ah, say, did I look like I was doin' the rushin'? Say, I'd like to know what you'd do if she ever gets that fond clinch on you and—"

"There, there!" breaks in Mr. Robert. "If you don't mind, we will not discuss the possibility. The situation is bad enough as it stands. I have promised to take tea with her this afternoon."

"Gee!" says I. "Then you're one of the gray gulls."

"Eh?" says he.

"Page 29 in 'Liltings,'" says I. "You better read the book."

Mr. Robert, though, claims he can prove an alibi, and goes on to say how this is a strictly business proposition. Seems Lola is more or

less of a lady plute as well as a lady poet, and among other knicknacks that's been handed on to her is some Mesaba Range property that the Corrugated would like to annex to their iron holdings. Havin' met Lola crossin' from Liverpool a couple of summers ago, and havin' had a good deal of her society on the trip over, Mr. Robert takes a chance on droppin' a personal note to her makin' an offer. Hence the mornin' visit.

"All of which," goes on Mr. Robert, "interests you to this extent,—I've decided to take you with me when I go up there after luncheon."

"Just as much obliged, Mr. Robert," says I; "but there's liable to be a rush on this afternoon, and I guess I'd better stick around here."

"Then you have one more guess," says he. "We start at three-fifteen for the tea."

That's what we did, too, and I don't know as I ever saw him quite so near havin' fidgets. He has plenty of chance to work up a case; for the place we was headed for was one of these On-the-Hudson joints up beyond Yonkers. He says the house is named Aurora Lodge.

"Must be some swell, then," says I. "Didn't make it all peddlin' pomes, did she?"

"Hardly," says Mr. Robert. "The MacIntosh fortune, I understand, was made by sellin' a hair restorer. There is one of the ads

now in the end of the car: 'MacIntosh's Anti-Bald: Hair Back or Money Back.'"

"No wonder she can be so reckless with her poetry books!" says I. "But, say, Mr. Robert, just where do I fit in at these tea doings?"

"I wish I knew," says he. "The fact is, Torchy, that Miss MacIntosh is of a—er—well, she has rather an affectionate nature."

"Yes, I noticed that," says I. "But I played goat this mornin'."

"So you did," says he. "And this afternoon it may happen that—well, hang it all, Boy, you ought to understand!"

"Sure!" says I. "She's liable to go to a clinch with you. That it?"

"If there shouldn't chance to be anyone else handy, yes," says he. "And my idea was that if you were there you might, in that event—er—create a diversion, you know."

"Start something, eh?" says I.

"Precisely," says he. "Of course, I trust it may not be necessary; but I've had one experience,—on the steamer; narrow shave, by Jove! I don't care to risk another. And this business affair may take us off into some secluded corner, you see."

"I get the picture," says I. "Lola develops a loppy streak, and there you are. But suppose I've been shut out?"

"You can be within hearing distance, at

least," says Mr. Robert. "I'll tell you: I will cough twice."

"Which will be my cue to cut loose, eh? I'm on," says I. "But what then? Do I start a bonfire, or throw a fit, or chuck a cat through the window?"

"Anything," says Mr. Robert, "providing you break up the scene. I'll stand for anything."

"Huh!" says I. "Then it will be a case of thinkin' quick and actin' quicker. I hope I don't have paralysis of the nut then."

"If you do," says he, "it will be the first time on record."

Well, say, that was some order, wa'n't it? And the more I thought it over, the chillier I got below the ankles; so by the time we landed at Aurora Lodge there was a pair of us.

We was met in style at the station with a limousine, and snaked off a couple of miles and through a big pair of stone gates and up in front of an imitation stone castle, and bowed in through the double front doors by a butler. A minute more, and Lola comes floatin' down stairs all costumed in three different shades of yellow, with a yellow rose in her hair, and lookin' a mile high and three inches through.

We gets a warm greetin' that only stopped short of a football tackle, and then she tows us

into a forty-foot drawin' room full of gilt chairs and gold pianos and marble statues, and there we discovers the only other entry. He turns out to be a bilious complected shrimp with shell rimmed eyeglasses and a wonderful growth of mud colored hair.

"Robert," says Lola, "let me present my good friend, Lloyd Jepson, the painter. Mr. Jepson, you know, did that portrait of me that he had the impudence to hang in the Academy last winter."

Mr. Robert said he was glad to meet Mr. Jepson, and shook his mitt real hearty, too. Then Lola rumples my hair lovin' and lugs me to the front, and after they'd swapped a lot of polite chatter we had tea and sandwiches, and it begins to look like Mr. Robert had been shyin' at a shadow on the wall.

"Now I'm going to take you over the grounds," announces Lola. "Don't look bored, Lloyd. I know you've seen them often; but Mr. Ellins must be made to do his duty. Then afterward there are Castor and Pollux to be fed, you know. They are most precious possessions, Robert; so you must fully appreciate them."

"Riding horses?" says Mr. Robert.

"The idea!" says Lola. "Nothing so commonplace. Guess again."

"Monkeys, then," says he.

"Horrid man!" says she, tappin' him playful. "Now I'll not tell you at all. You must wait until you see them."

And all this time I notices Jepson scowlin' at Mr. Robert through his glasses, which gives me a new line on the situation. Looks like Jepson is backin' a little matrimonial boom of his own, and he thinks he's discovered another candidate. Well, that makes this tour of ours all the more int'restin'; for every time Lola makes Mr. Robert nervous by startin' to snuggle up as she points out this or that, poor Jepson grinds his teeth and exhibits other symptoms of distress. Of course I does my best at sympathizin' with him.

"Swell lookin' couple, eh?" I suggests, as we drops a little behind.

"Hah!" grunts Jepson.

"She don't hate him exactly, does she?" I goes on. "See?" and I gives him the nudge as Lola executes one of her loppy moves towards the boss and rolls them pale green eyes real kittenish.

"Gr-r-r-r!" growls Jepson, deep down in his chest.

And after we'd seen the orchid house, and the white tiled garage, and the fancy tulip beds and the deer park, Lola leads us down to the sunken garden and discloses the mystery of Castor and Pollux.

WE GET A GREETING LIKE A FOOTBALL TACKLE. *Page* 238.

UNIV.
OF
NION

"There!" says she. "There are my precious pets!"

And what do you guess? Why, down in a little round pond is a pair of pelicans. You've seen 'em up at the Bronx Zoo, I guess. And, say, of all the foolish lookin' birds that ever stretched a wing, they're the limit, ain't they? Honest, to see this pair sittin' on the water with their necks folded back, restin' their long bills on their breastbones, was almost enough to give you paresis by suggestion. They didn't look as though they knew enough to last 'em through the next minute; but no sooner does Miss MacIntosh begin jabberin' baby talk to 'em than they rouses up, stretches their necks, and starts squeakin' like a pair of rusty hinges.

"'Ou dear darlings! Does 'ou want ums' supper?" gushes Lola. "Well, ums shall have it, so ums shall!"

With that she presses a pushbutton, and by the time she's through explainin' which is Castor and which is the other, and how cunnin' they are, down comes one of the gardeners with a basket of yellow perch.

"Now, Lloyd," says Lola, "I am going to let you and Torchy feed my darlings while Robert and I have a little chat in the summerhouse."

I got one look at Mr. Robert as he glances around, and I knew he was wise to the fact that

he'd been let in for it, after all. For the summerhouse, you see, was a dinky, vine covered little affair up on the rocks a hundred foot back from the pond, and just the place for romantic doin's. Also Jepson was hep to the proposition that he'd been run on a siding. It was Lola's programme, though, so neither of 'em could renig.

"Beast!" mutters Jepson under his breath, glarin' after Mr. Robert.

"Eh?" says I. "Did you say anything?"

"Shut up and help me feed these fool birds!" snaps Jepson, grabbin' a fish and slammin' it at Castor.

"Well, what do you think of that for a quick lunch?" says I, as Castor unlimbers his long neck, opens his face about a yard, makes one gulp, and downs his perch.

With that I takes a hand in the game and chucks a bite to Pollux. He's just as nimble a feeder as the other, swallowin' an eight-inch perch without battin' an eyelid. Next I throws one between 'em and gets 'em scrabblin' for it. And of all the awkward, silly motions I ever saw! Why, it was more fun than a cow on skates! They'd hop up out of the water with their big wings floppin' and their short legs wabblin', and down they'd come splash all in a heap, and then you'd see one or the other give a gulp, and it would be all over.

I got so interested in the game that I clean forgot all about Mr. Robert and the fair Lola, until all of a sudden I hears a couple of loud "Ahem's!" comin' from the summerhouse.

"Gee!" thinks I. "She's gone to a clinch with him! There's the signal!"

And here I was with nothin' on the slate and no rules to follow. How the blazes was I goin' to raise a disturbance out in the open? I might jump on Jepson and push him into the pond; but that would be a low down trick, with the water as cold as it was then. Still, I couldn't think of anything else, and I was just sizin' him up for the assault and battery act, when I notices the pelicans. They'd each got hold of the same fish and was tuggin' away at it to beat the band. And there in a flash comes this fool idea.

The perch had been sent up strung on a heavy piece of cord, and there was only three or four left in the basket. Grabbin' the end one, that had the cord tied to his gills, I picks up another, fastens him the same way to the other end of the line, and gives the two a sling out into the pond.

Well, say, I never dreamed you could get so much fun out of a pair of birds. Old Castor Oil pounces on one fish, and Pollux snatches the other, and then they begins to swallow. But as fast as one gets a perch halfway down the

other would yank it away from him with the line, and then they'd begin fresh again.

After a minute or so of this they was two of the maddest pelicans in captivity. The way they churned the water up with their feet and wings, each tryin' to back off with his fish and get it down where it would do the most good—well, it was rich! A meal with a string to it was somethin' they hadn't run up against before, and they didn't understand what was wrong. The madder they got the louder they squawked, and right in the midst of the racket Miss MacIntosh lets go her hold and comes rushin' down lookin' wild and excited.

"Why, Lloyd Jepson!" says she accusin'. "What have you done to my precious pets?"

"Me?" says Jepson, indignant. "I haven't done a thing. I don't know what ails them."

About then old Castor gives an extra hard yank, snaps the other fish away from Pollux, gets his wings in motion, and goes sailin' around with the perch danglin' and slattin' first this way and then that. Mr. Robert gets onto what's happenin', and he just naturally doubles up on a bench hee-hawin'.

The fun gets wilder and wilder as Pollux goes flappin' up after his mate, while Castor, in tryin' to toss the perch up where he can swallow it, gets the cord wound around his bill so that it's sealed up as tight as an express pack-

age. At that he takes to the water again and goes thrashin' about reckless.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" squeals Lola. "He's chokin' to death! My poor pet is being murdered! How can you sit there laughing at his agony, Robert? Help! Help!"

"I will save him, Lola!" sings out Jepson. "I will save your pet!"

And in he goes, patent leather shoes, frock coat, glasses, and all, up to his neck in the cold water, and splashes out to the rescue of dear Castor. It wa'n't any cinch job, though; for Castor ain't sure whether Jepson is a friend in need or is goin' to spring some fresh stunt on him; but the little man fin'lly corners him and unbuttons his bill for him.

"There!" says Miss MacIntosh, helpin' the drippin' Jepson out of the pool and gettin' a side hold on him with one arm. "That is what I call a manly action," and she casts a stony glare at Mr. Robert.

"Why—er—yes—quite so," says the boss, tryin' to straighten out his face. "Much beyond me, you know."

"I haven't the slightest doubt of it, Mr. Ellins," says she.

"Then—ah—er—Torchy, I think we'd better be going," says he, and with that we backs off, leavin' the touchin' tableau still on the boards, with the heroic Jepson wet but a winner.

"Well?" says I, as we gets to the station. "Was I a little behind schedule?"

"Oh, a miss is as good as a mile," says Mr. Robert. "But how and when, for goodness' sake, Torchy, did you manage to think up that ridiculous scheme?"

"Ah, say, Mr. Robert," says I, "you don't think you can work things like that out by algebra, do you? That was one off the bat."

CHAPTER XV

HOW OLD HICKORY CAME BACK

COURSE, it was bein' kept a dead secret. That's why every last one of us in the Corrugated gen'ral offices knew all about it, and went buzzin' around, talkin' it over under our breath and lookin' solemn. There'd been some little suspicions the afternoon before; but when Mr. Robert shows up on the tick of nine next mornin' and buckles in to work, there couldn't be any doubt but what something serious was the matter.

I don't know how it spread, either; but by ten o'clock it was all over the shop. And the size of it was that the old man had gone to pieces. Uh-huh! Old Hickory himself!

"Gee!" I whispers to Piddie, confidential and chummy for once. "And I didn't suppose anything less'n a drop hammer could put him out. What was it?"

"Some kind of a stroke, they say," says Piddie. "We had warned him, you know, over and over. He wouldn't let up, though, not a bit. And now it's come. Sad, isn't it?"

"Mighty tough, I call it," says I. "Bar-

rin' one, he was the best boss I ever had. Heard how bad off he is? "

"Very critical state, I understand," says Piddie, lookin' as important as if he'd just come from a consultation. "I—er—we are very much worried."

As a matter of fact, all he knew was just what the rest of us did,—that soon after lunch the day before Old Hickory had sent out a hurry call for a doctor; that he'd been helped into a taxi an hour later; and that Mr. Robert was on the job now. But that's Piddie. And at a time like this I wa'n't feelin' gay enough to give him the proper calldown.

"Good old sport!" says I. "Hope he pulls through."

I throws it off easy and sort of careless; but just the same I couldn't think of much else all the rest of the day. For, somehow, when you get right up against a thing of that kind, it's diff'rent. Why, we'd always thought of him as some kind of a human steam engine that could go on, day after day, month after month, so long as the boilers were kept full and the fires up. Then there was the other side of him, that we'd all had glimpses of now and then; and I guess I don't need to tell you that the worst of Old Hickory was on the outside.

So I was attendin' strictly to business that day, and not indulgin' in any josh interludes.

and wonderin' why it was I couldn't seem to throw off the choky sensation I had every time I went past the door of that empty office. And then about four o'clock Mr. Robert pushes the buzzer for me, and when I gets in on the carpet I finds him jammin' a lot of papers hasty into a document case.

"Here, Torchy!" says he. "These are to go right up to the house. You must get them there before four-thirty. Understand? They're for—er—Father, you know."

"Yes, Sir," says I, and I didn't think I could get up a husky voice so sudden. It was hearin' Mr. Robert call him Father instead of Governor, I guess. Anyway, when we swapped a quick glance I couldn't say whether it was his lamps that was blurred up so, or just mine.

"You've heard, I suppose?" says Mr. Robert.

"A hint or two," says I. "And I'm mighty sorry, Sir."

"I know," says he. "But not a word outside. We don't know yet, and—er— Get those up there before he starts."

So I wa'n't surprised, when I lands up at the Ellins house, to find the limousine waitin' at the curb, and the butler at the front door with his hand on the knob.

"Papers for Mr. Ellins," says I, "from the office."

"Yes, yes," says the butler nervous. "Step inside. They're getting him ready, and in a moment now— Why, bless us, here he comes, Sir!"

Now, I hadn't been figurin' on anything but leavin' the case and scootin'. I'd slid inside, and was standin' with my back to the stairs, when I hears the deep breathin' and the slow, heavy steps, and I knew as well as if I had eyes in the back of my head what was comin'. But even then I hadn't figured on quite such a slump. Maybe the boss was never much on the gazelle act, with his two hundred and fifty-odd weight and his forty-eight belt line; but he always had a sure, steady tread, and a sort of husky swing to his shoulders that gave you the idea he was runnin' under a full head of steam.

All that was gone now, though. He had one arm draped limp over a man nurse, and the other restin' on the shoulder of his valet. But it was the sight of his face that gave me the hardest jolt. Didn't have any more color in it than a piece of Swiss cheese, and the rough-cut jaw was loosened up and flabby. He has his chin down and is watchin' the stairs, so he don't spot me until he's right alongside. It wa'n't until then I noticed how dull and soggy them steel blue eyes of his had gone. As he gets sight of me the old look flickers back for a sec-

ond, and he even tries a weak imitation of a smile.

"Well—you see—Son," says he, gettin' it out hard, "they're shipping me off in—in bad order. What have you there?"

"Papers from Mr. Robert, Sir," says I. "And I'm mighty sorry—we're all sorry to—"

"Enough of that!" he growls. "I—I'm not all in yet, not—not by a blamed sight!"

"Yes, Sir," says I. "Good-by, Sir."

"Shut up," he snaps, "you and your good-bys! I—I'll come back, you—you young whelp, to fire you two or three times more! Huh! Steady now, Boys! Confound these clumsy feet of mine! Steady! There, that's it. Here we go, like—like a blasted three-headed centipede suffering from corns!"

The last I saw of him they was wedgin' him into a corner of the limousine with pillows, and the man nurse was givin' him dope to keep him braced up. Seems he was bein' sent off where he could take the rest cure, and diff'rent kinds of baths, and get a change of climate.

"It's only the beginning of the end," says Piddie.

Guess that's about the way we all felt; for Mr. Ellins wa'n't the kind to give up just for a toeache, and we knew that when he let go it was because he couldn't hold on another minute to save him.

For a week or so there wa'n't any news at all. Mr. Robert would only shake his head when I asked him. A little later we begun to get more cheerin' bulletins. He'd shipped off the nurse and was stirrin' around by himself.

Then one day, when he'd been gone about a month, there comes a wire from him askin' for a confidential report on some deals he'd started and had left hangin'. "Don't telegraph," he says. "Send someone who can answer questions."

So Mr. Robert files this message:

Will send Mr. Piddie with full information.

Piddie's been in there an hour or two, havin' details drilled into his head, and was all swelled up like a toad over it, when there comes this second wire from the old man:

Piddie be blowed! Post Torchy and send him along.

Mr. Robert has to grin, too, when he shows me the message. "Think you can do it?" says he.

"Looks like I had to, don't it?" says I. "I couldn't go back on the boss. What's the line?"

And less'n two hours later I'm on my way south, with a few collars and socks and things in a kitbag, a lot of figures on the back of an

envelope, and my head full of things that would have made the market hum some if I'd let 'em out. By afternoon next day I'm down in the long-leaf pine district, pilin' out of a bus in front of a hotel that would fit snug in two city blocks.

It was some welcome sight, too, not to find Old Hickory bein' pushed around in a wheel chair. He pads in on his own feet: not quite so springy as usual; but lookin' a lot better'n I'd expected to see him.

"Huh!" says he. "You look natural enough, Son."

"Same to you, Mr. Ellins," says I.

"Don't lie to me, Torchy," says he. "I'm an old piece of junk, and I know it; but there are one or two jobs I mean to finish before I go on the scrapheap, doctors or no doctors! Now let's see if we can find a quiet corner in this confounded antediluvian retreat, and we'll get down to business."

Well, we had a great session of it, him pumpin' out information and makin' notes for orders he meant to put on the wire, and me answerin' questions.

"Good work!" says he at the finish. "You have got a head on your shoulders, after all; and if you've brought the facts all straight I think I can put in a few good licks, even at this distance."

"Then I jump the night train back, do I?" says I.

"What for?" says he. "Don't you like the place?"

"Sure I like it," says I.

"Then suppose you knock around here with me for a day or so," says he, "and fool me into believing I'm still alive."

"Gee!" says I. "Honest?"

For, believe me, this Pine Springs joint does show up some classy and magniferous. You know—miles of neat walks and drives, with flowerbeds and hedges at every turn, and on all sides just acres and acres of smooth lawns. Why, it looked like the whole shootin' match had been upholstered in green plush. Then there was this big hotel, with wide verandas fitted up comf'table, and off in the distance the tall pines, with the mountains behind.

Could I knock around there a couple of days? A couple of months, if I was pushed to it! So Mr. Ellins tows me in to the desk, and I puts my autograph on the book like a reg'lar plute guest, and when the bellhop pilots me to my room I chucks him a dime just as haughty and insultin' as I knew how.

It wa'n't until I'd spent a couple of hours waitin' while Old Hickory has some kind of treatment, that I discovers how quick you could get used to that sort of thing. By the time I'd

done about four laps around the verandas, inhabited only by old ladies doin' baby Irish crochet in groups of four or five, and then strolled out to the golf grounds and watched a lot of old duffers in white flannels pluggin' around the course, I begun to get wise to the fact that, while all this might be nice to look at for a little while, it wouldn't be so blamed excitin' as a steady diet.

It wa'n't any more stirrin' durin' the evenin', either, after Mr. Ellins had finished his mush and milk and I'd galloped through a twelve-course feed. The boss hits the feathers prompt at eight-thirty, and I'm left to watch the old ladies play auction bridge inside, or go out on the veranda and listen to the old sports talk golf.

Near as I could dope it out, that was all there was to it,—golf and baby Irish by day, golf chin and auction at night. And hardly a guest under sixty to be found! It was easy enough to figure out why. All you had to do was consult the weekly rate card. Take about sixty years to pile up enough gold reserve to stop at one of these joints more'n a day at a time, unless you have a lump left to you, and then of course you want to hit up some real swell resort where the live ones flock.

I was wonderin' just where Old Hickory fitted into that programme; but when he ap-

pears for breakfast I knew. And, say, you should have seen him in tweed knickers and a Scotch cap and a Norfolk jacket.

"Z-z-z-zing!" says I, "but you don't look much like an invalid in them sporty togs, Mr. Ellins."

"Don't I?" says he. "Well, I feel like an ass in 'em."

"How's your game?" says I.

"Eh?" says he, glancin' suspicious at me. "Oh, I'm coming on. I—er—I'm going out for a little practice turn now."

"Can I lug the clubs?" says I.

"Why," says he, flushin' a little, "perhaps I'd better have my reg'lar caddie do that. He gives me points, you see. And I don't suppose you care to come along."

"Sure I would," says I.

It struck me he wa'n't anxious for my comp'ny; but as there wa'n't anything else on the card I just trails along anyway. Course, I knew he wa'n't any Travis; but I understood he'd tackled the game before at times and wa'n't in the novice class. Yet the exhibition he puts up that forenoon was the very punkest you could imagine. Think of a man of his size swingin' his whole weight at a little white ball and only knockin' it a dozen feet at a time —sometimes missin' it altogether, too! Honest, I got behind the caddie and blushed for him.

What puzzled me most, though, was the fact that Old Hickory seems to have lost the art of cussin'. You know how he used to rip 'em out in the office when things went wrong? Well, here he was, swattin' away at that ball, and either drivin' it into the ground, or just knockin' dents in the atmosphere, and him only turnin' red behind the ears and never tearin' off a single cuss.

"Gee!" says I, as he grunts disgusted after a mighty swing that would have been a corker if the ball had only been trained to hop up a few inches. "That's too bad, Mr. Ellins. But don't mind me. Go on and say it."

"It's no use, Torchy," says he. "I exhausted my entire profane vocabulary the first two days. Didn't I, Caddie?"

The caddie grins and nods his head.

"But I don't believe it does any good," says I, "keepin' feelin's like that bottled up."

"I'm sure it doesn't," says he. "That's why I'm so sore at that fool doctor of mine for sentencing me to a year at golf. Son, I'll never be able to play this game in a hundred years."

"Gwan, Mr. Ellins!" says I. "I seen some old guys yesterday, one of 'em over seventy, that could poke it out quite some ways."

"I know," says he. "They can seem to do it, blast 'em!"

And I couldn't see just why he should be so

grouchy over it. But after the turf cuttin' was finished and Old Hickory had beat it for the shower bath, I had a little side talk with the caddie on the subject. He's a bright, wise lookin', half grown young smoke, and answers to the name of Milton Smith.

"Milton," says I, "on the level now—the boss is pretty rank at this golf thing, ain't he?"

"Yassuh," says Milton. "Ah spec he is."

"Ever seen worse?" says I.

He admits he ain't, often.

"And he's too bad, eh, to get out and play in the same class with the average run of these old duffers?" says I.

Milton wa'n't anxious to cast any asparagus on the play of a certain party who was payin' him seven a week reg'lar for two hours' work a day; but by hard pumpin' I got enough out of him so I could frame up a gen'ral view of the situation. And that was about it. Old Hickory, who'd always been a topnotcher in anything he'd ever tackled, was up against a proposition now where he didn't rank one-two-sixteen. And I could guess, too, just how deep that must cut him.

Also this gave me the key to his queer actions that mornin', when he'd stood around more'n half an hour, waitin' idle while the other old sports, in bunches of twos and fours, had

started off, and him never bein' asked to join in. They seemed to be gettin' a lot of fun out of it, too, joshin' each other, and makin' side bets on the length of their drives, and so on.

A hearty, husky lot of old gents they looked to be, and when it came to complexions—say, I've seen that wild-cherry-bark tint here in town,—you know, the kind that looks like it was burned in permanent,—and I'd wondered how you got it. I know now. Palm Beach or Nassau in winter, Pine Springs or Lakewood durin' April, May, and June, and either the White Mountains or Bar Harbor all summer. That's the recipe—and, believe me, it comes some high!

It seems just the sort of thing Mr. Ellins needs, too, and of course there wa'n't any question but what he could afford it. At luncheon I hinted as much, and the hint struck a chord.

"Yes, I suppose so," says Old Hickory, sighin' deep and starin' absentminded into his soup. "And these chaps will hang on, most of them, into the seventies and eighties. Perhaps they are satisfied with this sort of existence, too; but I couldn't be. Golf may be all right to fool away a half-day with now and then; but it isn't a big enough game for me to live for entirely. Look at these men here. Has-beens! I've known most of 'em in my time, and forgotten them. There's old Rutter over there. Why, we bought him out and closed up his smelters

back in '95! Then there's Parkloe, over in the corner. He quit somewhere in 1902 or 1904,—heart trouble, I believe. His sons are running the business now. Jellison, here, just at the left, pulled out about the same time. Couldn't stand the strain. Well, they're still on top of the sod. But what do they amount to? Why, they can still play golf. Bah! Not for me, Son! I'm built different. Just the same, I'd give a thousand dollars—yes, five—if I could stand up in front of that bunch just once, and show 'em I could hit the ball."

And if you could have seen the solid set to that rugged jaw of Old Hickory's, you'd known just how hard he meant it.

"Say," says I, gettin' a sudden wild thought, "suppose you could, just once?"

"Then I'd call it quits and take the consequences," says he grim and determined.

Well, I didn't spring my scheme then. In fact, I wa'n't wise enough to the game to know whether I could pull it off or not. First I had to have another talk with Milton. And Milton dug up some ideas that helped. Next we had to see the greens keeper, who deals in golf clubs as a side line. At first he didn't think he could doctor up a club the way we'd sketched it out; but when I took a chance of promisin' him a twenty from Mr. Ellins he said maybe he might. Sure enough, he did, too. We had the club by

nine o'clock that night, and I'll bet that in the whole hist'ry of golf there never was one built like it before.

Havin' started in, I was bound to put the thing over; so by six A.M. next mornin' I had dug Mr. Ellins out of the hay, and for an hour and a half him and me and Milton rehearsed the act out behind the hotel where nobody could watch us. I was doin' the heavy coachin'.

"Now remember, Mr. Ellins," says I, "you ain't tryin' to knock the cover off. Just hit it clean. You got to hit it. You can, too, if you just follow Milton's directions close. Now—weight on your right foot, draw back slow, swing clear through; and, whatever else you forget, keep your eye on the ball! There! You looked up then. Say, this ain't baseball, you know. Matty ain't out there pitchin' high twisters. There's the ball on the ground. Now once more! Yes, and you let go of that right knee then. If you was diggin' a trench that would be elegant form; but you ain't buryin' the ball, you know. You're tryin' to swat it. Again! That's the trick! Square on the nose! Say, that was a poke, that was! Now repeat."

Oh, I rubbed it into him like I was a drill sergeant. And he stood for it. At that, though, I wa'n't sure he could do it when the time came.

But after a good breakfast we went to the

scratch manful and noble. I'd timed it so we got our ball down just behind a foursome and in front of a syndicate. There was ten or a dozen old sports in this syndicate game,—you know, where everyone pays the low man a ball at each hole,—and they was all bunched around the home tee, waitin' their turn to start, when I gives the signal and up marches Old Hickory, with Milton carryin' the clubs and extra equipment.

Say, it was some bluff for a duffer player like Mr. Ellins to spring, too. Milton tees the ball up careful, and then hops on the sand box, unlimbers a long pair of field glasses, and prepares to watch where the ball goes. At that I grabs the megaphone and begins to shout "Fore! Fore!" at the top of my lungs—with the nearest player in sight a good three hundred yards down the course.

I thought that would get 'em goin'. And it did. The syndicate bunch stopped their joshin' and practice swings and gathers around with their eyes bugged and their mouths open.

"For Heaven's sake, Ellins," says one, "how far do you expect to drive?"

"Fore! Fore!" I yells. "All right now, Mr. Ellins; I guess they're away in front. Let 'er go!"

And Old Hickory is right there with his good eye. He draws back careful, swings with

all his might, but steady, and carries through lovely. There's a crack like snappin' a whip, and Milton gets up on his tiptoes with the glasses.

"Yassuh, yassuh!" says he excited. "I see it, Suh! Ovah the secon' bunkah, Suh!"

"What?" gasps the syndicate crowd. "Drove the second bunker!"

But Old Hickory follows directions. He don't stop to answer any fool questions, but swings his club jaunty, and starts down the line, with me and Milton, still carryin' the megaphone and field glasses, pushin' eager behind. He'd turned the trick! He'd shown that bunch he could hit the ball, and even if we did quit and sneak back to the club house as soon as we got out of sight, we'd put it over!

Find the ball? Sure we did. Had it with us all the time, in fact. Never heard of a hollow headed driver with a rubber valve facin', I expect? Well, it wa'n't all my invention, for Milton and the greens keeper helped out; and it was Milton suggested puttin' the powder cap inside the club head to make the crack when the ball was scooped up. And for a fake drive it was a most convincing performance. I'll bet five years from now they'll still be tellin', down there at Pine Springs, how Old Hickory Ellins once drove the second bunker.

That wa'n't the best of it, though. Mr. El-

lins was so braced up and tickled over the act that he has the nerve to send for a big specialist who was down there on a vacation, and call for an estimate on how long he would last if he quit the golf business then and there and went back to his desk. I was on hand to hear the verdict, too.

"Last?" says the specialist, after he's thumped him all over. "Well, I can't say as to that, Mr. Ellins,—perhaps ten years, perhaps twenty,—but I'll say this: if you quit business now, and try to satisfy that ninety horsepower temperament of yours with nothing but golf, I wouldn't guarantee you two years."

"But—but see here!" gasps Old Hickory. "I've had a slight stroke, you know."

"Bosh!" says the specialist. "Who told you that,—Nivens? I thought so. That's his line. Can't see anything else, you know. Touch of acute indigestion, more likely, with a little rheumatism and gout to help along. Why, you're as sound as an oak plank!"

"And I needn't devote the rest of my life to golf?" says Mr. Ellins.

"Not unless you want to cut it short," says he. "That's another of Nivens' fads. Ask him why he doesn't do it himself. He's rich enough. But he doesn't quit, does he? He still makes his hundred thousand a year, puts in six hours of office work a day, and plays a

wretched game of golf at odd times. So may you, if you choose."

"Whe-e-e yow!" explodes Mr. Ellins. "Torchy, go get those blasted golf clubs of mine. I want to prop 'em against a chair and jump on 'em. Then see about our reservations for the next train. I mean to be back at my desk before closing time to-morrow, and inside of forty-eight hours I guess that Guggenheim crowd will find there's more or less fight left in Old Hickory Ellins yet!"

Eh? Well, say, you just keep your eye on the Wall Street news for the next few days. Yes, yes! He's on the job.

CHAPTER XVI

SPEEDING UP UNCLE ANDY

"How now, Torchy?" says Mr. Robert, here the other mornin', as he stops by the brass gate to size up my radiant frontispiece. "She must be back, eh?"

"Uh-huh," says I. "Think I'd be wearin' this face just on account of the weather?"

"Good!" says he. "And I hope Aunty is well, also?"

"You get your wish then," says I. "Trust a lemon for keepin'."

"Oh-ho!" says he. "Aunty still a little cool to you, is she?"

"Cool!" says I. "Say, after I've been near her two minutes I know how that Swede pole picker felt when he was makin' notes at 90 south."

Eh? Oh, all right. Little jiggly music there, please, and I'll try to sketch it out for you. You see, it had been weeks and weeks, and all the line I'd had on Miss Vee was now and then a picture postcard showin' real palms growin' in front of big hotels and folks wearin' summer suits. That when I was wadin' through bliz-

zards and dodgin' grip epidemics. Say, why don't we cop out a few of those West Indies and get John D. to pipe the climate up here?

Then for awhile there wa'n't even a postal, and I'd begun to think I'd been scratched off Vee's list for good, when here one Saturday afternoon, as I was wanderin' lonesome up towards the park, I gets a glimpse of some slim ankles and a long waisted walkin' jacket, and a hint of straw colored hair under a nobby spring lid, and I has a thrill somewhere below my vest pocket that I knew couldn't be any false alarm.

The straight backed old girl with her I could locate as Aunty on a guess; but the heavy old gink that was walkin' flat footed on the outside I couldn't place at all. The three of 'em was nearly a block ahead; but I wa'n't long in puttin' steam into my footwork, and I'd just got within hailin' distance when hanged if they don't swing into a big gray buildin' and disappear. I was for takin' all chances, though; so it's me up the steps after 'em, and I was pushin' right past the entrance when an old guy in brass buttons blocks me off.

"Ticket, young man!" says he.

"Ah, that's all right," says I. "Left my annual pass in my evenin' clothes."

He wouldn't fall for that, though, and steers me up to a window where another old geezer is passin' out pasteboards at fifty a throw.

"What for?" says I. "What's the bill?"

"Paintings," says he. "This is the Academy's spring exhibit, you know."

"And you got the nerve to tax me a half just for that?" says I. "Say, honest, pass me through and I'll turn my back on 'em."

It was a case of comin' across with the coin or stayin' out, though. "Any rain check?" says I.

"Nothing of the sort," says he. "These are oils, not water colors."

"You score," says I, as I anties a split bean. "Gimme one standin' room. And did you notice which way that last trio went?"

He couldn't say; so I roams in, makes a turn at random, and finds myself in a big hall with the walls just plastered reckless with hand painted work of all kinds. Don't they use up a lot of paint, though, these artists? And slingin' it around careless that way, it's a wonder to me they never get any on the gold frames.

Course, I'd paid for all the looks I was a mind to take; but one or two glances at the nearest specimens was enough. Maybe they was all right pictures; but nothin' to get excited over. Besides, I knew of an unlisted exhibit that was really worth lookin' at, if I could find it.

As there wa'n't any great crush, it was dead easy. I hadn't gone down the line very far be-

fore I spots old flat-foot gawpin' up at one of the numbers sort of mushy and sentimental. Alongside him was Aunty, her gold lorgnette up critical; and a little behind, lookin' sort of bored, was Miss Vee herself. And, say, she don't get over it! M-m-m-m! Same strawb'ry icecream tint on her cheeks, same cute little ears, same chirky tilt to her pink chin.

Needn't think I stood off there with my feet glued to the floor for long, though. Just then another bunch comes shovin' along, and I pushes right in with 'em. A minute more and I'm up where I can reach out and give one of her free hands a quick squeeze. She turns in a flash, flushin' indignant, and the sparks was dartin' out of them big gray eyes before she finally discovers who it is. At that she slips back and returns the squeeze.

"Why, Torchy!" she whispers. "How did you ever find us here?"

"Cost me a half," says I. "But I ain't kickin'. It's worth double. Say, you look better to me than any—"

"S-s-h!" says Vee, shuttin' off the flow with a gray kid glove. "Aunty might hear."

"What then?" says I. "Can't an old friend pass you the compliments of the season?"

"But you don't understand," says she. "Aunty's getting to be very strict. You see,

she has decided on someone at last, and we—we've disagreed. I think he's just horrid!"

"Not old flat-foot, there?" says I.

"No, no!" says Vee. "It's Snappy Westlake. He's jolly well off, though, and he's in the right set, and—"

"I fall," says I. "You're bein' shooed his way, and she's tryin' to pin the 'Keep Off' sign on you. But I don't count, do I?"

"Aunty can be silly over a lot of things," says Vee. "She found out about the postals, and she remembers how you and I— Well, we had quite a talk."

"Good old Aunty!" says I. "Then I'd be apt to be left on the mat if I came around, eh?"

"She wouldn't like it at all, I'm sure," says Vee. "But I'll tell you something—Uncle Andy lives next door!"

"Him?" says I, pointin' to flat-foot.

That was it. Seems he wa'n't a reg'lar uncle: only an old friend of Aunty's.

"But where does that help?" says I.

"Stupid!" says Vee. "Next door, I said," and I see a twinkle in them big eyes.

"Gee!" says I. "But I was on the freight, wa'n't I? Me for Uncle Andy! What's his special line?"

"Why, he's a widower," says she, "and spends most of his time mooning about telling what an angel his—but they're moving on.

Good-by, Torchy. Quick now—Aunty's turning around!"

So I ducks behind a fat woman, does a sudden sneak to the rear, and the reunion was all off. I'm left with a whole lot of uncorked conversation, to watch Vee go driftin' down the gallery. Annoyin'! I felt like a cat on a tin roof. And all the helpful hint Vee can throw out is that Uncle Andy lived somewhere next door. Say, that was grand, wa'n't it—specially as I didn't know him from last Friday week?

"It's either a case of breakin' and enterin'," thinks I, "or of pushin' my luck. Anyway, I guess I'll stick around and see what happens."

Come to think it over, too, I can't say whether I just fell into it, or had it handed to me. But I was taggin' along when Uncle Andy takes it into his head to drop out of the procession and camp down on a red plush sofa, leavin' the others to go on around by themselves. He's sort of a friendly lookin', goat faced old bunch of works; some puffy under the eyes, but with a good color on his face, and most of his hair left.

There wa'n't any time to plot out a campaign; so I pikes straight for him, squats close alongside, and goes to sizin' up the same picture he's gazin' at so slushy. It's of a sweet young thing all in white bendin' over a rosebush.

"Some queen, eh?" says I, like I was thinkin' aloud.

"Beg pardon?" says he.

"Nothin' worth mentionin'," says I; "only the young party there in the garden strikes me as real classy."

"Ah! You like it, do you?" says he, kind of warmin' up. "It reminds me of someone who was very dear to me; someone, I might say, who is still very dear."

"The wife?" says I.

"Yes," says he, "my dear wife."

"Gone, eh?" says I.

"These five years," says he, diggin' out a handkerchief and proceedin' to swab his eyes.

"Well, well!" says I. "That's rough. Looked some like that when she was younger, did she?"

"The eyes are strangely like hers," says he; "only my Alicia had a much gentler, sweeter expression. It was in a rose garden that I first met her, too."

"Think of that!" says I, with the sympathy stop pulled clear out. "Can you beat it? Cute name, Alicia. Got plain Alice skinned a mile, ain't it? Sometime back, that garden episode was, I expect?"

Does he get the cue? Say, inside of three minutes I was hearin' the story of Alicia, from the time he first saw her home from meetin',

down through the sleigh ridin' and singin' school period, to the big event when she finally sponged all the other entries off the board and let Andy fit on the ring. And me? Say, I'll bet he never run across any small but select audience that had anything on me in the listen-in' line, or who would come back for more with a straighter face. For he sure was windy when it come to throwin' in the mushy details.

"Hers was the kind of loveliness," he goes on, "which never faded. As a girl she was beautiful; but as a woman she was charming. You should see a portrait I had painted of her when she was twenty-five."

"Gee!" says I, drawin' in my breath. "Wish I could."

"Then you must," says he, pattin' me on the shoulder. "You must, indeed."

Can you see me disputin' him? I let him plan it all out how the very next day I was to come up and have Sunday afternoon tea with him and inspect all the pictures of Alicia he had in stock.

"It is unusual, I presume," says he, "but I've taken a great fancy to you, my boy; and if you don't mind listening to a prosy old man—"

"I can stand it if you can," says I. "What's the address?"

"Thomas is my name," says he, "Andrew V. Thomas, and I live at Pelham on the Sound."

"You do!" says I, workin' up business of surprise. "Why, there's a young lady friend of mine lives right next door to you—Miss Vee."

"Yes, yes!" says he. "And so you are a young friend of Verona's? Why, my boy, she and her aunt were with me only a moment ago. Come, we will find them."

"Sorry, but I'll have to renig this time," says I. "Maybe you could fix it up to have her drop in to-morrow, though; that is, leavin' Aunty out. I ain't so strong for Aunty," and with that I tips him the wink.

"He, he!" chuckles Uncle Andy. "I understand. But we'll arrange that. You come up to-morrow."

"You can gamble on that," says I. "It's as sure as Fourth of July."

So it's me for Pelham, all dolled up in my new checked spring suit and baby blue tie and the silk socks I got for Easter. And I'd doped out how Vee and I would stand for Uncle Andy's fond recollections for about ten minutes on a stretch and then throw the switch on him. But what do you guess? Why, he'd bugged the scheme entirely, and instead of just Vee on the side veranda, there was Aunty, too. And when Uncle Andy appears to greet me at

the front door he has his hanky out and his eyelids is all red.

"Don't mind me, my boy," says he. "We were just talking of dear Alicia. Come right out and join us."

"If it's all the same to you," says I, "maybe I'd better sidestep. Aunty here for the afternoon, is she?"

"Oh, I had forgotten," says he. "No, she will be going back for her nap soon."

"Then suppose I just slide inside easy and wait until she does her flit?" says I.

He agrees to that, pilots me in where I can get a view through the curtains, hands me a magazine, and goes back to Aunty.

"As I was saying," I hears him remark, "there never was another like dear Alicia. She was the gentlest, kindest—"

Well, I can't remember the whole oration, but Uncle Andy sure was spreadin' it on thick and mushy, and all the response I could make out as comin' from Aunty was now and then a snort. At last she breaks in.

"Humph!" says she. "Don't you think that's about enough for one afternoon?"

"Why—why, my dear Sarah!" he protests. "I—I don't know what you mean."

"Then I'll make it clear," says Aunty, snappin' it off crisp and decided. "Do you realize, Andrew, just how many times during

the past five years you have been through this same rigmarole? And how many times you have wept on me? Why, you have sobbed on my shoulder until I've been positively damp from it! It's getting monotonous!"

"But—but, Sarah!" snuffles Uncle Andy. "You know that Alicia was—"

"I know all about Alicia," Aunty breaks in. "I ought to. We went to boarding school together. She was a nice, lovable girl, and she made you a good wife; but she was no angel. She was vain, and indolent, and a trifle selfish. She cared more about keeping her figure and complexion than for anything else on earth, and you know it as well as I. Besides, why go sniffling and moping about all the rest of your life?"

"You—you don't understand, Sarah," protests Uncle Andy. "I'm a lonely, wretched old man without her."

"Then it's time you found another," says Aunty.

"Why—why, Sarah?" gasps Uncle Andy.

"I mean it," says Aunty. "That's what's the matter with you. You need a wife. I decided that sometime ago, and for the last month I've been giving you a chance to find it out for yourself. Why else do you suppose I've been carting you around and introducing you so much? Come, now, haven't you met at least

half a dozen attractive women at my house during the last fortnight?"

"But—but I never dreamed, Sarah," says Uncle Andy, "that—that—"

"Which only shows what a ninny you are, then," observes Aunty. "Now tell me—weren't you interested in any of them?"

"Why," says Uncle, fidgetin' some in his chair and pinkin' up kind of guilty, "that young Miss Dickinson was a—a—"

"Fiddlesticks!" comes back Aunty. "And you almost old enough to be her grandfather! What about Annie Leavitt?"

"The old maid schoolteacher?" says Uncle Andy.

"What if she is an old maid?" demands Aunty. "That was only because she took care of an invalid mother for so many years. But she's still under forty-five, and she is a cultured, capable woman. And she was not merely a schoolteacher. She was principal of a girls' high school. She has made two trips abroad. She has just inherited ten thousand dollars; so she is by no means dependent. And she is rather good looking."

"That's a fact," admits Uncle Andy. "Splendid shoulders. Fine brown eyes, too. But do you think, Sarah, that I would—er—that is—"

"I shouldn't wonder," says Aunty. "I've

talked with her about you. She thinks you have a lovely home here, and she agrees with me that you need a wife very badly. Also she has an idea that you are an interesting talker. You see, she hasn't had such a dose of Alicia as I have. But the only way to really find out is to ask her yourself, Andrew."

"But, Sarah," says he, holdin' up both his hands—"Why, I've hardly given her a thought."

"Yes, you have," says Aunty. "You've noticed her shoulders and her eyes. So let's not beat about the bush. I've had her visiting me for the last week, and I can't ask her to stay much longer. So come over right away and get the business done with."

"What, now?" gasps Uncle Andy.

"Why not?" says Aunty. "She's waiting in the garden. You see, I promised her I'd send you over. Come, Verona, I must have my nap."

And just as though it had been a matter of borrowin' a cup of sugar that she'd settled, Aunty gets up and sails down the side steps, leavin' Uncle Andy sittin' there with his mouth open and his eyes bugged. As Vee goes by the window, I pushes back the curtain and gives her the hail easy.

"You!" says she. "How did you manage it?"

"Tell you later," says I. "And say, ain't there room for another couple in that garden?"

"Silly!" says she. "Try for yourself," and as she follows Aunty she throws back over her shoulder one of them quizzin' smiles.

It's a good three minutes, though, before Uncle Andy comes out of his trance and strolls in. "Did you hear?" says he.

"Sure," says I. "And say, Aunty has got the Bunty business down to a science, ain't she?"

"But what am I to do," says he, "with Miss Leavitt waiting there in the garden?"

"Do?" says I. "Why, go to it. She suits, don't she?"

"I—I suppose she does," says he. "In fact, she is a most charming woman. But I—I hardly know what to say, how to begin."

"Ah, piffle!" says I. "When they get past forty with never a nibble you can shy the preliminaries. Just cuddle up and shoot off the Romeo stuff impromptu. It'll get over."

"Do you think so?" says he. "But how do I look?"

"Fine and dandy," says I. "That is barrin' the sloppy hitch to your necktie. Here, lemme haul it up so the collar meets in front. There! That's better. And there's a little dandruff on your coat. Got a whisk broom handy? Now, if you shift those bunion slippers

for your best patent leathers, and let me smooth the nap of your silky sky-piece while you hunt up a walkin' stick and some yellow gloves, I'll back you both ways. That's the stuff! Why, you look like odds-on now. Throw your shoulders back, step springy, and remember that it's been sometime since Annie even sorted over the discards."

Some diff'rent Sunday afternoon programme than what we'd laid out, wa'n't it? But it suits me just as well; and you should have seen the way Uncle Andy braces up to it. I leaves him to go round and enter proper by the front gate, while I shins over the side fence.

It's a perfectly good garden for the kind, with a lot of windin' paths and shrubbery, and a cute little summerhouse balanced on a rock in the middle. And, sure enough, there's Annie inside, rockin' away placid in a rustic chair, and lettin' on to be readin' a book. Rather a plump, stylish lookin' party, Annie seems to be; with a few streaks of gray in her hair and a sort of comf'table, motherly air about her.

I was scoutin' around at a safe distance, one eye on her and the other on the path, when I hears a giggle from behind a big syringa bush.

"Oh, you Vee!" says I. "I've tagged you." But there's a swish and a rustle, and away she goes.

Well, I sprints after her, followin' the sound;

but it's quite some time before I corners her at the end of a grape arbor.

"A-ha!" says I. "I thought you'd be out lookin' for me."

"Pooh!" says she. "I didn't mean to let you catch me at all. I just came out to see how Uncle Andy was getting along."

"Let's, then," says I. "Ain't it rich, though? Why, the old sport started as kittenish as a three-year-old. Where can we get good reserved seats?"

"I know," says Vee, chucklin'. "Come along," and she leads the way to a clump of bushes that makes a sort of a screen between the summerhouse and the back of the garden. From behind that we was just as good as sittin' in orchestra chairs.

"Gee!" says I, "but they're dead slow, ain't they? Look at the distance between 'em."

And, honest, all Uncle Andy was doin' was lookin' at the book she'd been makin' a bluff at readin', and fussin' with his collar, that maybe I'd got a trifle snugger'n he was used to.

"See how schoolma'amy she's behaving," says Vee. "Why doesn't she give him a chance?"

They was a stiff pair, for sure. And both of 'em wise to what was on the card, too! Uncle Andy fin'lly ventures to hitch his chair a little closer, and Miss Annie does her part by leanin'

over and pointin' out something in the book. But in ten minutes that was all the progress they'd made.

"Oh, shucks!" says Vee. "It'll take them all summer at this rate."

"What they need is a little scientific speedin' up," says I. "Suppose we start something?"

"But how?" says Vee.

I whispers out my scheme, and after a few giggles she says:

"All right. But just in fun, you know."

"Not at all," says I. "I'm doin' this as a solemn duty to Uncle Andy. Come ahead now —reg'lar schooldays clinch, and keep up the gay chatter durin' the march past."

That's the way we did it, too—arms twined, heads close together, and both of us whisperin' nonsense and gigglin' over it, and never pretendin' to notice there was anyone within a mile of us. I'd have given a dollar, too, to have got a squint at the old pair in the summerhouse as we marches on down the path towards the house. But I couldn't.

By that time the giggles was the real thing, and Vee was so tickled over the scheme that she has her head bent clear over my shoulder and I was lookin' into them big, laughin' gray eyes of hers at close range, and I was feelin' sort of glad and tingly all over—when all of a

sudden I gets sort of a chill, and we both looks up, to find Aunty standin' glarin' at us, not ten feet ahead.

"Verona!" she snaps out like the crack of a whip. "What does this mean?"

And for a sudden break away that must have been near the record.

"Why, Aunty," begins Vee, "we were only —only—"

"Exhibition performance, that's all," I cuts in, "for the benefit of Uncle Andy and the other half of the sketch. Just givin' 'em a line on how it ought to be done, you know. Wait! I'll see if it took effect," and I dodges back down the path a ways. "Oh, say!" I sings out cautious, beckonin' excited with both hands. "Come ahead easy and take a look!"

It was a tough decision to put up to Aunty: for she had a few urgent remarks on tap for Vee and me. But she didn't want to miss out on any crucial moment, either. And after one look around she comes trottin' along, with Vee after her. I hadn't been springin' any fake bulletin. The scene in the summerhouse was worth viewin'. That clinch of ours was catchin', all right. Uncle Andy might have been some out of practice, and maybe Annie was new to the game; but they was cuddled up some cozy, and they acted like they wa'n't in any hurry to let go.

"Well, I must say!" remarks Aunty. "Andrew appears to have succeeded."

"All of that," says I. "But don't mention it. Vee and I only did it to oblige, you know," with which I does a quick exit towards the front gate.

Maybe that don't get by either; for Aunty's a wise old girl. But, say, I guess at that I'm some solid with Uncle Andy, who lives next door.

CHAPTER XVII

A KICK IN BY TORCHY

It's just as I was streakin' through the arcade, here one Saturday noon a few weeks back, that I bumps into this tall, awkward specimen of the frock coat who's standin' right in the middle of the passageway gawpin' up at the floor directory. As I was in a hurry, we met up some solid.

"Ah, say!" says I. "Why not do that sleep-walkin' act on the roof, where there's more room?"

"I—I beg pardon, really!" he gasps out, rescuin' his silk lid from the marble tiles and jammin' it on hind side front. "I—I was merely—"

"Chee!" I breaks in. "Ferdinand, eh? 'Nough said."

Remember Ferdy, do you,—the one that Miss Marjorie Ellins fin'lly picked out for her very ownest own; and how we married 'em off last winter, with a simple home weddin' that was almost as quiet and unpretentious as a circus parade? Well, this is him, shell-rimmed eyeglasses and all. But the long coat and the

shiny turret was new additions. He used to go moonin' about, you know, in baggy-kneed pants, leather puttees, a Norfolk jacket, and a cloth hat that had lost all its shape.

"Well, well!" says I. "All gussied up for high tea, ain't you? Where's the walkin' stick, though?"

Ferdinand inspects each hand, and then flushes up guilty. "Why, I—I must have mislaid it again. Pshaw!" says he. "That's the third this week, you know."

"Well, the week's most over," says I. "You ought to start in Monday with one chained to your wrist; that is, if you're bound to lug one around."

"It's on Marjorie's account, you see," says Ferdy. "She—er—she thinks I ought to."

"Oh-ho!" says I, winkin'. "And I expect she inspires the frock coat and the glossy lid? Trainin's well under way, I see."

"Oh, but Marjorie's perfectly right about it, you know," says he. "A man shouldn't go about looking tacky. She's quite right."

"You got the idea, Ferdy," says I. "If you can't win out in an argument, beat her to it. But how do you happen to stray so far down town?"

"House hunting," says he.

"In the Corrugated Trust Buildin'?" says I

"You see," says Ferdy, "I'm looking up a real estate firm which has offices here."

"Call it off, then," says I. "Wrong day, Ferdy. Why, if you found 'em open at all you'd only get next to some two-by-four clerk. Saturday afternoon, you know, all the bosses are off playin' golf, or tryin' out their new tourin' cars. Better wait until Monday."

"Pshaw! says Ferdy. "And Marjorie will be so anxious to know what I found out! You see, this sort of thing is all new to me."

"I can believe that," says I.

In fact, I don't know of any kind of real estate business that wouldn't be new to Ferdy. Course, I understand, when it comes to lookin' over a collection of jades, or discoverin' prizes at an old book auction, that Ferdy has some standin' as a wise guy. But there's no use denyin', even if he is in the fam'ly now, that, outside of a few specialties, Ferdy is more or less of a prize boob. He don't even have sense enough to beat it back to his club when I hints that it's lunchtime.

"Why, is it?" says he. "Really, now!"

"Uh-huh," says I. "But maybe you'll join me in a hot fried egg sandwich and a mug of chicory?"

"Why—er—thank you," says Ferdy. "I think I will."

What do you know about that, eh? Me set-

tin' up a fifteen-cent handout to one of the Van Rusters, and him costumed for Sherry's or Del's! It seems, though, that my little tip had just naturally bugged Ferdy's whole programme, and he don't know what to do next It all comes out between bites, while we're sittin' there in the armchairs at the dairy lunch.

Him and Marjorie had gone to housekeepin', you know, real modest and unassumin', in one of them four-story and basement brownstone-front affairs up on the West 70's; with only one butler, and just a rented limousine, and a few simple little necessities like that. Wonderful, ain't it, how fine you can cut it when you make up your mind? And with the cost of tiaras all the time goin' up, and your Steel preferred only payin' about 18 per cent.!

Course, they visited back and forth a good deal at the Ellins house on Fifth-ave. and with Ferdy's folks at their big country ranch, and Marjorie stands it noble all winter until the weather begun to warm up, and then all of a sudden she comes out with her grand scheme. They must build a country place. Right away, too!

"Do you know," says Ferdy, finishin' the last of the fried egg, "we became frightfully interested,—sat up nearly all night sketching plans, and right after breakfast I hurried down

to that McKee chap who builds such stunning golf clubs and so on. But what do you suppose?"

"He stole the plans," says I.

"No," says Ferdy, "he just laughed. Said a house like that would cost a hundred thousand, and wouldn't be fit to live in, anyway. I suppose it was a little spread out, the way we had planned. Besides, he said we couldn't build inside of a year, and Marjorie wants to move within a month, at least."

"Think of that!" says I. "They ought to keep such things in stock. What was your next move?"

"Why, I was talking with Marjorie's father about it, you know," says Ferdy, "and he advised us to buy one ready built. 'Pick up some other fellow's mistake,' says he. Shrewd old chap, Mr. Ellins."

"Old Hickory's all of that," says I. "Why don't you let him find one for you?"

"But he won't," says Ferdy. "Wants me to do it myself, you see; and he offers to pay half the cost if I can buy a place without being cheated."

"Gee!" says I, "but that's some proposition! I'd go after that."

"I'd like to," says Ferdy; "but how am I to know? Still, I've been getting lists of country houses, and some of the prices seem quite

reasonable. I suppose I'd better settle on one and buy it."

"Offhand, just like that?" says I. "Why, you'd be stung sure."

"Would I?" says Ferdy, starin' sort of helpless. "But I must find something somewhere. Marjorie's already planned a housewarming party, and she has asked Miss Vee and a lot of—"

"Eh?" I breaks in. "Why, say, Ferdy, that makes this worth lookin' into. Maybe I could help."

"Oh, I say," says Ferdy, beamin' grateful through his glasses, "that would be bully of you! You see, if I could really find a bargain—why, Mr. Ellins would—"

"I get you," says I, "and, believe me, he deserves gettin' set back! Ferdy, leave it to me. You can't tell me what you want because you don't know yourself. But I can make a guess, and if I don't run somethin' down within a week, I'll sick on someone who can."

Maybe that was some heavy bluffin' on my part; but what's the use stayin' outside when you see a chance to kick in? And thinks I, "Now, if I can only—" But never mind all them sunny dreams of mine. You know what gen'rally happens in a case like that.

But I gets busy. I don't go first off to any bloomin' real estate shark. I starts with that

hunch of Old Hickory's about buyin' someone else's mistake. And what I begins with is a search for parties that had made mistakes recent. Eh? Well, where do they make big mistakes oftenest and quickest? Answer to yesterday's puzzle: Wall Street. So it's me for a review of the financial news for two or three weeks back, takin' special notice of such chatty items as seats posted for transfer, voluntary petitions, and receivers appointed. After that, of course, it's only a matter of huntin' through the telephone directory to find where they live.

And you should have seen me that afternoon in the 'phone booth, blowin' my coin reckless against long distance calls and givin' an imitation of a big realty operator playin' himself for a winner. It goes somethin' like this:

"Hello! Is this Birchwood Terrace? Well, say, I want to talk to Mr. Collister. Yes, the boss. Ah, what's that to me if he is engaged? This is important. Put him on the wire. Yes, yes! Ah, Collister? Say, what are you holdin' Birchwood at? Yes, I know—haven't really put it on the market, and all that. But you're thinkin' of unloadin'? Thought so. Now what's your lowest figure for a cash offer? Eh? Ah, come, Mr. Collister, this is no relief fund you're up against! Yes, I expect it did cost you something like that; but that kind of property ain't like a bank, you know. You

can't always take out what you put in. Course, if you can swing it for a couple of years you may find some easy mark who— Say, now, wouldn't twenty thousand flat tempt you? No? Well, don't get peeved about it. I might offer twenty-five if I got real desp'rate. There, you see, we're gettin' together. Come now, twenty-seven? Certified check on day of sale. Eh? That's right, think it over. I'll call you up again—say about Tuesday next. So long."

What did I know about Birchwood Terrace? No more'n you. I was just takin' a chance: not one; but a dozen. Honest, at the end of an hour I'd paid out four sixty-five, got stung by three snippy butlers, been roasted to a turn by a couple of chesty owners, and had talked myself hoarse. But I'd got track of six or seven joints, located all the way from Ardsley-on-the-Hud. to Coscob, Connecticut, and there was no tellin' but some of 'em might do. That was up to Ferdy.

For the next few days, too, I has him keep the limousine gears hot, joggin' around lookin' 'em over, only givin' him one at a time, so he don't get his ideas mixed, and makin' him report definite after every trip. I'd call him up in the mornin', for instance, and say:

"Here, Ferdy, take this down: Oak Lawns, Scarsdale; gentleman's country place; ten acres; genuine old Colonial house; eighteen

rooms; three baths; fine duck pond; and a billiard room on the third floor. Take a squint and let me hear from you before noon."

Then maybe in half an hour I'd get a message something like this: "Yes, that may be a nice place; but Marjorie says she doesn't know anyone in Scarsdale, and she objects to ducks, and she thinks the billiard room ought to be on the first floor, and she doesn't want an old house, anyway. She prefers a new one, you know."

"Correct," says I. "Lemme sift out a few then. Nothing old, no duck ponds— Say, Marjorie got any friends in White Plains? Off it goes then. How about up along the Sound? Oh, she has, eh? That's good. Well, here's Crestholm; Mr. Burton Speedwell, owner. That has—"

"Speedwell?" breaks in Ferdy. "Why, that's right next to Tommy Hunter's place! We've been through that, and it's perfectly corking! Why, it's one of those white cement affairs, with a cute green-tiled roof, and splendid big porches, and a cunning formal garden, and a perfectly gorgeous view from—"

"Say," I cuts in, "never mind the raptures. Will it do, that's the main question?"

"Oh, it would be lovely!" says Ferdy.

"Well, then," I goes on, "Speedwell's askin' price is thirty thousand. How about it?"

"Why, I guess that's about right," says Ferdy.

"Gwan!" says I. "Why, his firm got nipped in that cotton flurry last week, and he's got to turn everything into cash, down to his socks. He'd be glad to get twenty, maybe eighteen. Do I get your O. K. on an offer of twenty?"

I did. And I was about to call up Speedwell, when I has a rush of thought to the head. It was time I did. "Huh!" thinks I. "And where does little Percival get a look-in? Nay, nay!" So I rings up a firm of swell house brokers, makes a deal to deliver a place for sale and a customer for the same, and has 'em put it in writin' that half the commission comes to me. They was glad to do it, too.

Say, what do you know? Inside of four days the papers are all signed, and the next mornin's mail brings me in a three-figured check that's the biggest slice of easy money ever chucked my way. Some class, eh? Why, for two or three days there I could have patted Morgan on the back!

Then there was Ferdy still to hear from. Well, I listened and listened. Nothing doing. Another week slips by. No grateful response from Ferdy. I get it from Mr. Robert that he

and Marjorie are mighty busy preparin' to move out to their new country place. Next I hear they're there. Well, Ferdy's an absent-minded dope, after all, and maybe he expects to slip it to me when he asks me out to that house-warmin' stunt.

So maybe you can guess how sore I am, here the other day, when I hears Mr. Robert telephonin' his man to take the four-thirty-six out and have his things ready at Crestholm in time for dinner. It was on, then! And I ain't even so much as asked to come out and help serve the icecream, or string up paper lanterns. Vee was goin' to be there too, and— Oh, well, when you get to bein' sorry for yourself you can waste a lot of sympathy, can't you? I grins and takes it out on Piddie. Course, come to think of it serious, I wa'n't exactly in the house-party class; so what could I expect? But as the day went on the grin came harder and harder.

"Oh, by the way," says Mr. Robert, stoppin' at the gate on his way back from luncheon, "I met McIvers, the real estate broker down in the arcade just now. He seems to think we have rather a bright young man somewhere in our office."

"Another hidden mystery, eh?" says I.

"Not so much of a one," says he. "The description seemed to fit you. But you haven't

been speculating in country house property, have you, Torchy?"

"There wa'n't any spec to it," says I. "It was a cinch. I just bunched a place and buyer for 'em, that's all."

"I see," says Mr. Robert. "You just—By Jove, young man! it wasn't the one Ferdy got at such a bargain, was it?"

"Uh-huh," says I.

"Whe-e-ew!" whistles Mr. Robert. "So that's how Ferdy came to do it! And did you happen to know the arrangement he had with the Governor about that?"

"Sure," says I. "Ferdy don't keep much back, you know."

"But see here!" goes on Mr. Robert. "You saved Ferdy something like eight thousand on that deal. Has he—er—remembered you in any way?"

"Ferdy ain't long on mem'ry," says I. "I was sort of lookin' to be rung in on some of these house-party doin's. Miss Vee, you know, is goin' to be there, and—"

"And he has forgotten you?" says Mr. Robert. "Ferdy's an ass!"

"He means well, I expect," says I.

"Humph!" says he. "He'll do more than that. Hand me that telephone book!"

And, say, you know Mr. Robert. He don't half do things. Inside of ten minutes I has

profuse apologies and a perfectly good invite from Ferdy, and then Mr. Robert takes me in tow and we beats it down Broadway to the swellest gents' clothing store in town.

"Ferdy has an account here," says Mr. Robert; "so you can go the limit. We'll start in by getting a full evening outfit."

Well, that's what happened. From clawhammer and white vest we goes right down the line, includin' a silk-faced Tuxedo, half a dozen dress shirts, and a bundle of black silk socks at one-fifty a throw per each. He even had the nerve to charge up an English sole leather suitcase that we stowed the loot in. Honest, I almost felt like a taxi bandit as we comes out. Wanted me to go right along up with him and butt in at dinner, Mr. Robert did; but I drew the line at that.

"Why, there's to be dancing, I believe," says he.

"Maybe I'll show up on the side lines for that," says I.

And it's lucky; for, believe me, there was some struggle before I got harnessed into that new open-faced uniform for the first time. At that, though, it wa'n't much after nine o'clock when I lands out at Crestholm; and as I walks in there's Marjorie in the hall, givin' the glad hand to late comers.

"Oh, you dear!" says she, makin' a rush

and givin' me the shoulder tackle. "I've just heard it was you who found this perfectly splendid place for us."

"Ouch!" says I. "Do I have to get mussed just for that?"

"I told Ferdy I was going to," says she. "Now Collins will show you your room, and please come right down. There's someone here you'll be wanting to see. She doesn't know, either. Quick, and you may have a glimpse of her now! There!" I got the glimpse, all right; and it included a long-legged guy with a hemp pompadour.

"Who's the lengthy one with her?" says I.

"Oh, that's Sappy Westlake, of course," says Marjorie. "But don't mind him."

"Thanks," says I. "I'll try not to."

It was easy enough to say; but as I stops on the stair landin' for another look back at 'em, down sails a stiff-necked old female party, and the next thing I know she's paused to give me the gimlet eye. It's Aunty!

"Ah!" says she, with that sniff of hers. "Mr. Robert's young protégé!" At that she squints down to where Vee and Sappy Westlake was just clinchin' for a waltz, and then she turn to give me one of them pickled-lime smiles of hers. Get the idea, don't you? Sappy's the one Vee's aunt has put the inspected stamp on.

and it sure does look like he was havin' things all his own way.

Well, I didn't have a word to say. Marjorie was busy when I comes down again, and as there wa'n't any other reception committee on duty, I kind of dodges around the edge of the crowd, until I fin'lly finds myself out on a side veranda where I has plenty of elbow room and can get a good view of the orchestra through the open window. Anyway, it was a fine night to be on the outside lookin' in,—nice and warm, with a full moon, and all that,—so I balances myself on the railin' and does my best to enjoy it. All I really needed for the hermit act was a solitaire outfit, or a cut-up picture puzzle.

I hadn't been there long though, before I sees the partic'lar couple I'm most int'rested in come strollin' out through the double doors towards me. And, say, if there's anything that gives me more courage than I got any right to have, it's Vee in a party dress. Course, I don't expect it's the same one she wore the first time I ever saw her; but it's all the same to me. Maybe there's less sleeves to this one, or more lace on it; but it matches up well with that sea-shell-tint flush on her cheeks. She has a wide band around her straw-colored hair too, and she looks— Well, she's Vee, that's all, and that's enough! I steps out smilin' and cheerful.

There's no doubt about it bein' a surprise, either.

"Why—why, Torchy!" she squeals, droppin' Sappy's arm and meetin' me halfway.

"I bob up now and then, don't I?" says I. "But just a minute—Westlake, isn't it?"

He admits it is, gawpin' curious at me. "That's all right, then," says I. "And, Westy, you'll find Ferdinand out front somewhere. You can catch him if you hurry."

"But why—er—what—" he begins.

"Oh, he'll tell you all about that," says I. "You ought to get a move on, though. That's right. I'll take care of the young lady, and if you don't find us right here when you come back—why, we'll be somewhere else."

"Why—er—thanks awfully," says Sappy, startin' off dazed.

"Noble lookin' youth," says I. "Must be awfully int'resting, too. Eh? Say, what's the matter with me, Vee? Have I got something on wrong, or left something off, or—"

"No, no!" says Vee. "And I didn't mean to stare at you that way; only—only—"

"Oh, if that's all," says I, "keep it up. As long as I can stare back, I guess I win."

"Pooh!" says she. "You haven't forgotten how to jolly, have you? But you do look nice, you know."

"Help!" says I. "I'm being kidded! But

I hope it's true, for the sake of the comp'ny I'm in. As a matter of fact, Vee, you don't look so bad to me, specially in that classy outfit. Though maybe I shouldn't pass any remarks on the dress. Does Sappy, now?"

"He never fails," says she. "'Regular ripoin'!' is his stock expression."

"Then I'm in right for once," says I, "even if it is only for a minute. I hope Westy is a patient searcher."

"Did Ferdy really send for him?" says she.

"I didn't say so," says I. "I merely suggests to Westy where he could find him if he tried."

"Torchy!" says Vee, workin' up a weak line of indignation to cover a giggle. "You had no right. He—he isn't so stupid as he looks."

"I should hope not," says I. "Maybe I'd better go lead him back?"

"Oh, well, since he's gone," says Vee, "never mind."

"Then suppose we camp over here on the rail and wait," says I, "and you can tell me all about Sappy."

"Really, now!" says Vee, liftin' her eyebrows sarcastic.

"I know you're dyin' to tell someone," says I. "But honest, Vee, is it all settled?"

"Oh!" says she. "Does it matter?"

"A heap," says I. "Course, Vee, I don't

have any rating in this, and I expect I ought to—"

"S-s-sh!" says she. "I think that Aunty's coming. Yes, it is. You might ask her, you know."

"Good-night!" says I, swingin' my legs over the veranda rail and droppin' easy onto the lawn. I'm in the shadow of the pillar there; so when Aunty arrives all she discovers is Vee sittin' by her lonesome.

"Not deserted, my dear?" says she.

"Not quite," says Vee. "Waiting for Mr. Westlake to come back."

"Ah!" says Aunty, breathin' deep and satisfied. And as she disappears inside I comes up smilin' on the other side of the rail.

"Well?" says I. "As we was saying?"

"You can see for yourself, can't you?" says Vee, spreadin' out the fingers of her left hand. And, say, there's nothing like a ring in evidence.

"Lemme look closer," says I, gatherin' it in gentle. "One—two—three—four— Why, that's so, Vee! Then—then it isn't settled?"

"Silly!" says she. "Of course not—not yet, anyway."

"Ahem!" says I. "But there's an elegant site for a nice solitaire spark right here."

"Pooh!" says Vee. "I think diamonds are vulgar."

"Me too," says I. "See, all I wear is this little birthstone ring Mr. Robert gave me last Christmas. Say, I wonder if it would— Well, blamed if it don't! Look at that!"

Vee snatches her hand away and looks. Then she sort of hesitates and smiles down at me and—and— Well, I sort of smiles back at her too, I guess; and I don't know how long it was I'd been gazin' into them big gray eyes of hers, gettin' nearer and nearer, until I has sense enough to just naturally reach up and— Well, we was makin' a clean, quick breakaway when the orchestra inside starts up one of them jiggly, lively new dance tunes, and across the veranda to our corner comes Sappy Westlake, with his brow furrowed up puzzled.

"Oh, I say, you!" says he. "Ferdy doesn't want me for anything."

"No more do we, Westy," says I; and then, whisperin' to Vee, "Shall we try this one? How about springin' the turkey trot? Sure, I can. I'd tackle anything with you for a partner, I guess. Only I have to count for a start. One—two— Now we're off!" and as we swings in through the doorway onto the waxed hardwood floor of the big drawin' room, I gets a glimpse of Sappy Westlake standin' there with his mouth still open.

"Look, Vee!" says I. "I believe your friend Westy's tryin' to swallow the moon."

CHAPTER XVIII

PICKING UP A FRIEND

WHEW! Say, believe me, I've had it handed to me seven ways for soup greens, and all on such short notice and with so many kinks in the programme that I don't know whether I'm a bush-leaguer, or on the bench with McGraw!

It all starts so salucious, too. Eh? Why, salucious comes from the Greek, by way of Ellis Island, and it means—why, just salucious; you know, like someone was feedin' you *café parfait,* and ticklin' you with a willow plume, and the band was playin'.

Anyway, I'd picked a prize out of the mornin' mail, just a dinky little envelope with one of Vee's cards in it; but in one corner is penciled faint and hasty the mystic summons, "Sunday, 3 P.M." Do I have to hunt up a Sixth-ave. seeress to discover the hidden meanin'? Not so, Percival! I'm a Willie Wise, and from then on it's a case of watchin' the rosy dawn all day with me, and passin' out kind words to Piddie, and wonderin' how anybody can lug around a grouch such lovely weather. Say, for thirty-six hours or so there I sports a

UNIV. OF ILL.

SAPPY STANDS THERE WITH HIS MOUTH STILL OPEN. *Page* 303.

disposition that would have had a front-row cherub lookin' like little Harry havin' the mumps on circus day.

And at two-fifty-nine Sunday afternoon what do you guess? Me in my new Norfolk suit and best straw lid, appearin' jaunty at the garden gate. Course, I might have taken a chance on the front door; but as long as nothing of the kind was mentioned in the specifications, and as I hadn't heard a word from Vee since that little affair at Marjorie's house warmin', where we'd left Sappy Westlake on the porch with his mouth open, why—well, I've met Aunty face to face a few times before, you know, and I could sort of forecast that if there was any welcome sign on the doormat it wa'n't meant special for me.

Maybe you remember, too, how Uncle Andy's house is right next door, and that I stood aces high with him. So it's into Uncle Andy's I strolls first, down the side path, and out to the back where there's a break in the hedge. Then sort of soft I gives the "Oh, you!" signal. There's nothing doing in the response line, though, But that's Vee's way. I slips through and scouts around until I locates the spot where I'd found her once before, and whistles again. More silence.

"That's right!" I calls out. "Kid me along. I'm a good waiter."

I was pawin' around the shrubb'ry, rubberin' here and there in likely spots, when all of a sudden I fetches up in front of the summer-house and finds myself bein' looked over curious through a pair of gold lorgnette glasses by about the classiest specimen of gray-haired lady I'd ever got close to. No antique, you know; but one of these middle-aged queens that's lost her raven tresses but has kept a strangle hold on her daylight complexion and her graduation day figure.

"Well, young man?" says she, not peevish or haughty, understand, but sort of amused and sociable. "You seem to be looking for someone."

"Uh-huh," says I, grinnin' sheepish.

"Verona, isn't it?" she goes on.

"If you think that's a close guess," says I, "why, well—"

"But it isn't a guess," says she. "I'm quite certain. And you are Torchy; I can tell that by your—er—"

"Go on," says I, "pink thatch will do if you can't think of anything else. No use my tryin' to travel incog with that growin' on me, is there? But what then? If I'm in wrong, I know the way out," and I starts to back off.

"Oh, that isn't brave at all," says she. "And I'm sure you're not afraid of me. Come, I'll confess. I sent the card myself."

"Gee!" says I. "A bee bite!"

"I beg pardon?" says she, liftin' her eyebrows puzzled.

"Caught nappin' on second, that's all," says I. "Well, I'm tagged. What happens to me now?"

"You'll forgive me, I'm sure," says she; "but I thought it best to have a little talk with you. Won't you come in here and sit down?"

Say, she was a chatty converser, all right. It just bubbled out, all mixed up with smiles and shoulder shrugs, and willowy arm motions, not to mention a lot of shifty business with the eyes. Just seemed to come natural to her, this snake charmer act, and who was I to give her the frosty face? I walks in, but not without lettin' her know I hadn't shut both eyes.

"Most time for Aunty to show up with her tomahawk, eh?" says I.

She lets go of a few silvery gurgles at that. "You are rather keen, aren't you?" says she.

"Now and then I have my doubts about that," says I; "but I ain't hung out the To Let sign just yet," and I taps my forehead.

"My word!" says she. "But I hasten to assure you that Verona's Aunt Sally is not in ambush. You see, when I thought of that plan of sending one of Vee's cards to you, I also decided to pack them both off for the afternoon.

And I've done it. Now you're wondering why?"

"Something like that," says I.

"Well, then," says she, settlin' herself back conf'table on one of the seats and balancin' the lorgnette between the tips of two fingers, "it was because I found Sally had been making such a mess of things. She is an excellent woman in many ways, you know; but—er—"

"I get you," says I. "That's about how I'd sized her up, too; sort of fish-eyed and frosty."

"Oh, dear no!" protests the lady. "That is, if I understand at all your amazing idioms. A certain lack of tact, let us call it, and a perfect genius for mismanaging affairs in which young people are concerned. Of course, Verona has a temper of her own, too."

"Say," I breaks in, "couldn't we leave Miss Vee out of this?"

"Ah, a knight to the defense! Bravo!" says she, smilin' sort of quizzin'. "But we simply can't leave Verona out. It's all about her and Sally, you know. I found them at swords' points—oh, actually glaring at each other! There'd been a rumpus. It was all about a ring Vee was wearin'. Now!"

"Huh!" says I, turnin' red behind the ears.

"Then it was yours!" says she, clappin' her hands. "Vee wouldn't say where it came

from, you see. Sally couldn't get a word out of her. She insisted on knowing, demanded, stormed, all that sort of folly. And of course Verona wouldn't tell then. I'm sure I wouldn't, either. But with you it is different. Now, I'm asking you frankly; does it mean anything at all, that ring?"

And me, I'm sittin' there with my toes turned in, studyin' a crack in the floor and wonderin' if my back collar button will melt or just explode.

"But there!" she goes on, changin' her tone and startin' off on another tack. "Perhaps you ought to know first just why I am interested. I'm Mrs. Basil Burke."

"Gee!" says I, gawpin' at her. "*The* Mrs. Burke."

"Oh, yes," says she, lettin' out more ripples, "the awful Mrs. Burke! You've been reading the newspapers, young man!"

Just as though anybody could have skipped all them big headlines for so long. Why, as far back as when I was on the Sunday edition we used to run a half-page story about her every few months, reviewin' all the details of how the stunnin' Kentucky girl—"Queen of Blue Grass Beauties" was always worked in somewhere—had left her noble young lover waitin' at the church and eloped with a seventy-year-old Wall Street plute; how the n. y. l. had buckled on his

deadly derringers and chased 'em to Europe and all over the map, violatin' the Interstate Commerce Law and the Concert of Nations, until he fin'lly gets run in by a French cop that he'd upset in his hurry to catch a train.

But you've read all that. The young lover had a good press agent on the job, and when he gets back home he promptly marries one of the disappointed bridesmaids and gets himself elected to the Legislature; while the old plute shuffles off sudden at Monte Carlo, and the dashin' young widow comes back to open up the Fifth-ave. house, fight the will contest, and break into society.

Well, after that, you remember, she stars in that bathin' suit dinner dance; proceeds to make a monkey out of that Duke of Spaghetti, who almost lost his royal job on her account; and as a finish she's mixed up in this double divorce suit of the Willie Van Cleek's, which probably got the Newport alimony bunch more free advertisin' than any other event for years.

No wonder she decided to stay abroad for a while then! But it seems her knack of attractin' the spotlight hadn't been left behind; and, while I ain't letter perfect on all her giddy doin's over there, I got a gen'ral idea that she had at least one other hubby in the discards before she blooms out as Mrs. Basil Burke. Anyway, her pickin' the pet officer of the Royal

Lancers, and bein' presented at court when four double-chinned Duchesses said she shouldn't—well, that wa'n't missin' any tricks exactly, was it? And here was this matrimony expert puttin' me through the third degree about why Vee was wearin' my birthday ring!

"Excuse me," says I, takin' my eyes off my toes, "but just where do you fit in?"

"Where do I— Oh, I see," says she. "Why, Everett Westlake happens to be my nephew."

"Sappy?" says I.

"Now, now!" says Mrs. Burke, shakin' a finger at me. "You mustn't speak of him in that way, you know. It's not respectful. Perhaps you do not know precisely who Everett is?"

"I had a hunch," says I, "that he was the one Aunty had passed on as all right for Miss Vee."

"Yes, yes, of course," says Mrs. Burke; "but, aside from that distinction, Everett is a nice, well bred young fellow, with many good qualities and only a few bad habits. True, he may not be very brilliant; but he is a gentleman, the Westlake fortune is a big one, and he is an only son. Also his great-great-grandfather was a patroon."

"Eh?" says I.

"We will not stop to go into that," says she,

smilin' condescendin'; "but I may say that, in our crudely organized society, the descendants of those old Dutch patroons are our only real aristocrats. Verona, too, can claim a similar ancestry."

"You mean they're both upper crusters, eh?" says I.

Mrs. Burke nods. "One of Verona's ancestors," says she, "was Governor of Manhattan."

"Must have been a Tammany boss, then," says I. "I never heard about that."

"But you knew that she was an heiress, I suppose?" says she.

"I ain't looked her up in Dun's yet," says I. "Got it in big bundles, has she?"

"Not in her own right, as yet," goes on Mrs. Burke; "but there's a great deal of money in the family, and, while her poor father squandered most of his portion, Verona, thanks to her Aunt Sally, has never felt it. She has had every advantage, every luxury, that was good for her,—foreign travel, her own maid, the best of everything, from clothes to society. She has been accustomed to such things all her life. Do you follow me?"

"Oh, sure, I'm trailin' along," says I. "You're puttin' me wise to the fact that Vee belongs to the carriage-trade-charge-account, 'Home, Henri' class. But I sort of suspicioned

she wa'n't brought up over any Eight-ave. delicatessen store."

"Ah!" says she. "And now, Master Torchy, what about yourself?"

"Me?" says I. "Well, how many great-grandfathers back shall I start at?"

"Suppose we begin at the other end of the line?" says she. "Now just who and what are you?"

"Why, I'm Torchy, that's all," says I. "I'm ancestors, forefathers, head of the house, and everything else, all in one."

"But your father," she breaks in. "Surely you can tell me—"

"Nope," says I. "That's where I'm shy. Fact is, I got about as much fam'ly hist'ry as a cold storage egg."

"There must have been someone whom you remember, though," she insists.

"Nobody but Uncle Bill," says I, "and I ain't dead sure he was a real uncle at all. Anyway, he didn't take it serious enough to pay my board in advance when he slid out without leavin' any address; and, as Mrs. Leary used to say, no genuine gent would have been so thoughtless."

"And who, pray, was Mrs. Leary?" asks Mrs. Burke.

"A widow lady that kept furnished rooms down on West 9th-st.," says I. "Mr. Leary, he

Say, she had the punch to put over when the time came. What comeback did I have to that? Oh, this one-man's-as-good-as-another stuff is all right out in the street; but let's see you lug it into the parlor. Honest, the way she'd led up to jabbin' that question at me caught me with both hands in my pockets and my feet crossed.

"Why," says I, "I don't claim to be anybody in partic'lar, I guess."

"There!" says she. "I knew I could make you see it. Not but that you aren't rather a bright, amusing young fellow of your kind; but Verona and Everett, of course, are different."

Which was soothin' news, wa'n't it? I felt like a brass watch hung in Tiffany's window by mistake. "Well, what then?" says I.

"Why, now that you understand," she goes on, "it seems to me that your simplest course would be to write a brief note to Verona, asking her to return the ring. That would put a stop to all this nonsense at once. Couldn't you do that?"

"But—but I only let her have it in fun, you know," says I, "and I don't see how I could call it in without—"

"It's the only honorable thing for you to do," breaks in Mrs. Burke. "I've tried to make that clear, I think."

"Well," says I, scratchin' my head and tryin' to frame up some way of dodgin' such a raw

deal, "I don't want to stick around where I ain't wanted; but—but—"

There comes a crunch of tires on the bluestone driveway, and in whirls Aunty's limousine, circles in front of the summer-house, and stops under the porte cochère. Aunty has spotted us, too. I got a glimpse of her stiffenin' up as she swings by, and she no sooner gets out of the car than she pikes straight for us. There's someone else with her; not Vee, but a lady with copper red hair and a heavy dust veil over her face. She comes along, too.

You could see the fire in Aunty's eyes half a block off; but what was the use in my doin' a back dive and jumpin' the fence? Besides, as long as this ragin' scandal was the order of the day, I thought it might as well be threshed clear out; so all I does is get on my feet and lean more or less careless against a post. Mrs. Basil Burke has caught the battle signal, too, and she proceeds to head Aunty off prompt.

"Ah, back so soon, Sally?" says she. "Now don't look like a thundercloud. Yes, this is Torchy, and he and I have been having a nice chat together. He understands everything now, and he's going to be good. There! What do you think of that?"

"Humph!" says Aunty, glarin' at me suspicious. "How does he happen to be here?"

"I invited him, Sally," says Mrs. Burke.

"And I think he was just going. Were you not, Torchy?"

"I'm on my way now," says I, startin' down the path.

It looked like that was where it would end; for all Aunty does as I passes is to give me a shoulder shrug and the frigid stare. I'd got past her safe enough and was almost to the drive, when I meets the other lady. I'd stepped one side to let her by, when she stops sudden, kind of gasps, and drops a parasol she's carryin'.

Course, that's my cue to pick it up, hand it back, and tip my lid polite. By that time, though, she's brushed back the veil and is starin' at me harder'n I've been looked at for some time. And, say, I don't know why, but I didn't mind her lookin' at me that way at all. It was diff'rent from any sizin' up I've ever had before,—kind of gentle and friendly, you know, and maybe a little sad. Might have been only them big eyes of hers, though. Anyway, I guess I stared back; for, while she wa'n't what you'd call a professional beauty, I expect, she was worth lookin' at. She had a face that seemed to have something in it,—not the cold, showy kind, like Mrs. Basil Burke's, but—but —well, diff'rent.

We didn't say a word, either of us, which wa'n't so strange maybe, and it only lasted a

second or so. Then I has sense enough to lift my lid again and go along. Somehow, I knew she was lookin' after me, even then, and I'm dead sure I heard her call to Aunty and ask, "Sally, who in the world is that boy?" But what description Aunty gave of me I didn't catch. I guess it's just as well, too.

And it's funny, ain't it, how deep a little thing like that can stir you up? Here Mrs. Burke had put across a proposition that should have been enough to keep my dome works busy for the rest of the day; but I guess what I thought most about for the next few hours was this strange lady with the sad, gentle look in her big eyes.

Between times I chewed over Mrs. Basil Burke's suggestions on what a nobody I was; and, while I couldn't quite get to the point of writin' that note, I could see where it ought to be done. For, come to figure it out, who the blazes was I, anyway? Trouble has got to be some sizable too, before I lug it to the feathers with me; but that's one of the nights when I did.

Even next day I knew it was there, knockin' around in my belfry, sort of disturbin' the works. So I was feelin' a little less chesty and chipper than usual, with all them rosy dreams of the Saturday before faded from sight. It was near lunchtime when one of the arcade

specials come up from the ground floor and says how there's a lady out front in a taxi askin' for me.

"Gee!" thinks I. "Vee bringin' back the ring!"

But it wa'n't. It's the lady with the copper-colored hair. She's watchin' through the open cab window, and as I comes out to the curb she smiles real friendly.

"You'll not think me merely curious, I know," says she, holdin' out one hand, "but Mrs. Burke has told me something of your story, and I want to ask if—if— You said there was an uncle, didn't you?"

"Why, yes," says I. "As I remember, I called him Uncle Bill."

"But his full name!" says she eager. "What was it?"

"Seems to me it was Hayes," says I, "Hayes or Haines, or something near that."

"Then—then it cannot be," says she, sighin'. "Oh, pardon me! I mean that I've made a mistake. I thought, perhaps— But that doesn't matter. Thank you so much, Torchy! I—I wish it could have been. I—I think I like you, you know."

And me—well, I guess I was some fussed. "I don't kick any on that," says I. "I guess you're all right, too."

"Which makes us friends then, doesn't it?"

says she. "But listen; my home is abroad. I am on my way to the steamer now. Here, here is a card with my Paris address. If you should learn anything more of—of your father, or of this uncle, or if you should need help of any kind, or advice, I want you to promise to write to me. Will you? There, then! And good-by, Torchy! Good-by!"

With that I'm left standin' there on the sidewalk, gazin' after the taxi and holdin' her card in my hand.

The worst of it all is, though, that I'm still askin' myself, What's the answer? I ain't goin' around talkin' about it much, though. Someway, I feel like keepin' it to myself until I can think it out. I did sound Mr. Robert, to see if he'd ever heard of the name on the card. He hadn't. There was nothin' left but for me to call up Mrs. Basil Burke on the 'phone and ask her. That took some nerve; but I did it.

"A-ha!" says she. "So here is someone else who is curious. Well, Torchy, I shall be pleased to tell you all about her—when I hear that you have asked Verona to return your ring. Will that be to-morrow?"

"No," says I, "nor the day after, either."

"Why," says she, "I thought you understood that—"

"Sure I do," says I. "I'm a bright, amusin' sample of one of the lower orders that has

almost human instincts. I can be joshed along, or led on a string; but when you try to club me into doin' a thing, I'm apt to balk. Nix, Mrs. Burke—it's all off!"

And, havin' unloaded that from my chest, I hangs up. Was it a boob play? Am I lettin' myself in bad all round? You can search me. I wish—well, I wish that steamer of hers hadn't sailed yet. Somehow, I'd kind of like to put it all up to her,—you know, the one with the gentle eyes.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW THE GLORY BE CAME BACK

SEEMED kind of odd too, that while I'm still sore on this fam'ly hist'ry business, it should be Piddie that rubs in the salt. He was plannin' for his vacation flit and givin' me the usual long winded lecture on not doin' this and bein' sure to do that. It's an annual mystery to Piddie how the Corrugated ever struggles through the two weeks when he's away every summer.

"All right, Piddie," says I. "We'll do the best we can to keep the concern afloat. Yes, I'll watch the office supplies like I was a plain clothes man guardin' weddin' presents, and if I catch any of the lady typists snitchin' pencils or carbon sheets I'll wire you at once. By the way, will just Newport fetch you?"

"We are going West," says Piddie important. "Out to Ohio."

"Gee!" says I. "Way out there? What's the idea?"

"I've been asked to attend a reunion of the Piddie family," says he, swellin' up chesty.

"You don't mean it!" says I. "Then there's others like you? How many, now?"

"Over three hundred invitations have been sent out, I understand," says he. "That embraces the twelve known branches of our family in this country. There will be representatives present from England also, one of them a member of the House of Commons. We trace our line back, you know, to Sir John Piddie, who in the 16th century was knighted for—"

Say, if Mr. Robert hadn't rung the desk buzzer just then I expect I'd been loaded up with enough Piddie genealogy to have filled a book. As it is I'm sent out on an errand, wonderin' why it is some has their ancestors all card indexed, while others have lost theirs in the shuffle. There was Vee and Sappy Westlake, that could tell you where their folks was all planted. Even a pinhead like Piddie could roll off the lineage stuff. And me, I couldn't go any further back than a possible Uncle Bill.

That accounts, I expect, for my huntin' up Hunch Leary the same evenin' and trailin' along home to supper with him. He's got a new job, Hunch has, you know. Uh-huh! Started in by buyin' up a few choice grandstand seats for some of the big ball games, and now he's shook the messenger uniform and is a reg'-lar pavement broker. You can see him any night out on Broadway, with his fist full of dollar bills and orchestra centers, and a house diagram under his arm.

Quite a hot sport he's gettin' to be, too. I discovers also that Mother Leary ain't Mrs. Leary any more, but Mrs. Connolly, havin' annexed a coal and ice dealer who'd been a widower quite some time and had a couple of half-grown kids of his own.

"Then there's little Bub," explains Hunch, "who's arrived since the new deal, so we got some mixed fam'ly."

"Don't kick on that," says I. "You know where they all came from, anyway."

And Mother Leary that was seems glad to see me. She's put on some weight since she quit runnin' a boardin' house, and she's bloomed out with a lot of new hair. She ain't forgot, though, how to dish up corned beef and cabbage so they taste better'n anything your French chefs can put across. Maybe it was my expressin' a few sentiments along that line that gets her in such good humor after supper. Anyway, it looked like a good time for me to chance openin' the Uncle Bill topic, which wa'n't a favorite with her, as I remember.

"Where was it we drifted in from, though?" says I.

"Where, is it?" says she. "Sure, and that's more'n I ever knew, bless you. A wee lad of four or five you was then; with a hungry look on your face, and the eyes of you starin'

strange at everything, like you'd never seen folks afore."

"And Uncle Bill," says I, "what was he like?"

"Maybe he wa'n't such a bad lot, at that," says she. "Only sort of shiftless, I guess. Nothin' to be proud of, I can tell you, skippin' out that way, and him three weeks behind in his board."

"Never wrote back, eh?" says I.

"Not him," says she.

"How about unclaimed baggage?" I asks.

"Precious little did he come or go with," says she. "And all he left was some little suits of yours and a few knicknacks."

"What sort of knicknacks?" says I. "Anything with a name on it?"

"Never a name," says she, "and little you'd want unless—unless— Well, ye might as well have it now. It's a gold locket. I'll get it from the bureau drawer. There! Inside's a picture, too."

It's one of these plain, round, thin affairs and we has to use a table knife to pry it open. The picture was a dinky portrait of a youngish woman with big, dark eyes that sort of stared at you serious.

"The hair's painted red, see?" says Mother Leary. "That's why I thought it might be of

some relation of yours. Don't remember any such face, do you? "

"No," says I, "and yet— Well, it most seems as though I'd seen it somewhere, too."

"Very like," says she, "when you was a little shaver. Ye may keep it. It may come back to ye."

But it hasn't, though. Every night for a week I took a look and tried to remember, but I couldn't get it any clearer. And there I was, as far from bein' able to give my pedigree as ever.

Just about then I had what I call one of my mornin' hunches. You know 'em, don't you? Hits you when you first roll out, clear and hard, and sort of gives you a new angle on things all in a flash. You wonder too, why you never saw 'em that way before. My hunch was like that.

"Huh!" thinks I. "What's the use botherin' about a fam'ly tree, unless it's the kind that has real estate parcels and bunches of dividend bearin' stocks hangin' from the branches? Look at Piddie, tracin' clear back to Sir John, and never gettin' a cent out of it. Seems like my play, with no help from behind, is to enter as an unknown and qualify in the young plute class. That's a detail I've been neglectin'."

And say, that was the great thought I lugs

down to the office with me that mornin'. Course, I wa'n't worryin' but what I could do it, for I'd seen too many boneheads who'd won out without half tryin'. And here I was, right next to the big money bunch, and one of the insiders, as you might say, of an aggregation that had to run four sets of books to keep track of all the profits and make the common stockholders think they was gettin' a square deal. Who had a better chance, I'd like to know? Maybe some would have thrown out hints, or sprung it on the firm gradual. But that ain't my style.

"Mr. Robert," says I next mornin', "hadn't we better be lookin' around for some first class man to fill my place?"

"Why, Torchy!" says he. "You're not thinking of leaving us, are you?"

"Nothing so raw as that," says I. "I'm ready to be taken in, that's all."

"Ready to what?" says he, starin' sort of puzzled.

"Oh, to have my name go on the letter heads," says I. "Course, this office boy snap has been all right for a time, and I ain't registerin' any kick on the way I've been used, but I'm ripe for something fatter now."

"Oh!" says he. "You'd like to be promoted?"

"Say, that don't cover it, not near," says I. "It ain't being moved up a peg or two that I'm

strikin' for. What I'm plannin' is a broad jump, from the brass rail here into a room of my own, with my title on the ground-glass door and a whack at the dividends. Get the scheme?"

"By degrees," says he. "It's—it's rather sudden, isn't it?"

"Most everything good comes that way," says I.

"True, very true," says Mr. Robert. "But—er—what particular office, Torchy, do you think you would like?"

"Oh, I ain't picked out anything special," says I; "but you know, Mr. Robert, there's a lot of dubs holdin' down cinch jobs here that ain't any more use than a ham sandwich at a Chamber of Commerce dinner. I'll leave it to you which of 'em needs the fresh air worst. Only I want to break into this high finance thing right off."

"H-m-m-m!" says he. "You don't mind my consulting the Board first, do you?"

"Not a bit," says I. "Make it as regular as you like, so long as it ain't held up more'n a week or two."

"Ah, thank you, Torchy," says he. "And in the meantime—er—will you kindly fill this inkwell for me?"

It's a jolly, all right. Don't get the idea I ain't hep to that. I ain't been with the Cor-

rugated two years with blinders on, and when I see Mr. Robert straighten out his mouth and work up wrinkles in his eye corners, I know he thinks he's passin' out something comic.

But that's what I was lookin' for. It's a heap better openin' than goin' on the carpet with your toes twisted and stutterin' out how you'd like a little raise if it was convenient. How should the boss guess how good you are unless you think it out first for him yourself? Old Chris Columbus didn't wait for someone to pat him on the back and tell him he was a great discoverer, did he? He hired a band and went around shoutin' it out, and when it come to a show-down he made good. That's the way I felt about starrin' myself for a roll-top job with the Corrugated. I'd got to the point where I wanted something juicy in the salary proposition, and I was makin' my play along lines I'd tried out before.

But for once the system didn't work. For two or three days Mr. Robert seems to forget the little plan I'd put up to him, and then one afternoon he comes in from lunch about 2.30, feelin' contented and good natured with himself, and as he passes my desk by the door he has a sudden rush of memory to the head.

"By the way, Torchy," says he, "about that application of yours for the third vice-presidency."

"Make it second vice," says I, "as long as you're turnin' it down."

"Very well, second," says he. "But, while we have not as yet definitely concluded that we cannot avail ourselves of your offer, the matter has been temporarily laid on the table."

"Huh!" says I. "Hot air for nothing doing, eh?"

"Not exactly," says he. "As a compromise however, I am authorized to state that early next month a vacancy will occur in the bonding department, and if you care to consider—"

"Nix, not, never," says I. "No time killin' job on a long legged stool for little Percival. I know what that means—growin' gray headed on forty-five a month waitin' for someone to die. Say, if that's the best you can do, you save it for some director's son, some bright young college hick that don't know a stock quotation from the marks on a laundry ticket. But I hand in my two weeks' notice right now."

"Very well, Torchy," says Mr. Robert. "We shall be extremely sorry to lose you."

"Oh, you'll stand the blow, all right," says I.

"May I ask if you have any definite plans?" says he.

"Well, the Curb looks kind of good to me," says I. "Guess I know the game well enough to make a start."

"Going to run a shoe-string into a million, eh?" says he.

"Ah, no margin pikin', for me," says I. "Commissions! And I've got more'n a shoe-lace to butt in with, too. Never told you about that Glory Be gold mine stock, did I?"

Mr. Robert pricks up his ears at that, and before we'd quit I'd told him all about how I come by it, and had promised to bring it up from the safety box so he could look it over. As it happens I had a chance to get down there with the key that same day, and before closin' time I lugged the stuff in to him.

"Have you ever looked this up?" says he, after he's read the giddy lithograph clear through.

"It ain't listed," says I, "but the last I knew it was worth about fifteen."

"Fifteen cents a ton?" says he, grinnin'.

Say, I knew Mr. Robert meant well, but that got me sort of huffy.

"I'll put up options on all you can deliver at ten a share," says I. "I got that from Mr. Belmont Pepper, and if you knew him as well as I do you'd—"

"Ah, but I do know of Belmont Pepper, Torchy," says he, pressin' a button. "Wait a moment, I think we have a report on this very mine."

Say, he did, and it sure was a crusher. Noth-

ing less than an abandoned claim that had been salted to sell to suckers and was chiefly valuable to catch rain water in. Also the expert goes on to say that Mr. Pepper was wanted in four states for unloading fake shares.

Well, there it was in black and white, and nobody had a better hunch than me that the Corrugated Trust didn't carry any useless fiction on its records.

"It's too bad to destroy such a beautiful trust as yours, Torchy," says Mr. Robert, "but false hopes do not make a very substantial foundation for a career."

"Yes, that's all right," says I, swallowin' a lump in my throat. "I'm one of the sucker family, I guess, but—but I didn't think it of Mr. Pepper. Say, he looked like the real goods."

"So I have been given to understand by others," says he. "This being the case, however, I suppose you will reconsider—"

"Not much," says I. "I'm quittin' the office boy game two weeks from to-day. It's time I made a break anyway, and if the Corrugated ain't got a place for me worth while, then I'll use up some shoe leather lookin' for a firm that has."

Maybe that sounded some chesty when I shot it off, and I judged Mr. Robert took it for the real gritty article; but when I come to get out of the office that night, and go off by myself for

a general view of the situation, I didn't feel half so cocky. Being chummy with the main stem, and gettin' on chatty terms with nine per cent. quarterlies is all well enough as far as it goes. Cashin' in such friendships is different.

I didn't know how much like a down-and-outer I felt until I found myself on a park bench over in Madison Square, with my chin on my collar and my hands in my pockets, just like the other no-goods that drift in there from all parts of the map. My gold mine stock had been shown up phony, my bluff at joshin' a salaried job out of Mr. Robert hadn't got over, and in a fortnight more I'd be out with the banner chasin' a new pay envelope. I'd look nice, wouldn't I, callin' on a young plutess like Miss Vee!

"Bah!" says I, lettin' out a grouchy growl and movin' over on the bench as a seedy specimen wearin' a blue shirt and baggy kneed corduroy pants camps down alongside of me. He's carryin' an old kit bag and as he slumps down he drops it careless on my toes. It felt like it was loaded with pavin' stones, too.

"Ouch!" I squeals. "Say, why don't you look where you're dumpin' your quarry samples?"

"Oh, I beg pardon!" says he. "I'm afraid I was clumsy about dropping my— Why, hanged if it isn't Torchy!"

Course, in that alfalfa rig, and with all that

long hair and them sunburned whiskers, it's no wonder I didn't spot him at first; but the minute I hears that deep, smooth voice, I know it can't be anybody else but the one party I've been thinkin' hardest about for the last hour or so.

"Huh!" says I, "Pepper."

"At your service," says he, makin' one of his old time bows and then shovin' out the friendly palm. I pretends not to see it.

"What's the game now?" says I, kickin' the bag. "Gold bricks?"

"Why, Torchy!" says he. "This from you!"

"I know," says I. "Last time we met I was Simple Zeke from Clover Corners, and I had a swallow like an empty alligator. But even the greenest of us ripens up in time. Maybe I'm still verdant on the shady side of my nut; but I'm dead onto you, Pepper."

And honest, to see the way his jaw dropped and the look that came into his eyes, you'd thought I was a false friend that he'd trusted his watch to, and I was showin' him the pawn ticket.

"I am both pained and surprised, Torchy," says he. "Why, I thought we were old—"

"Sure we was," says I. "And the last I heard of you was when we shook hands, right over there on the corner of Broadway, and you

gave me your word about goin' West to work the Glory Be."

"Well," says he, "I kept my word."

"Gwan!" says I. "It's a fake. I've read the expert's report, and it ain't any more a gold mine than an Eighth-ave. sewer is the Panama Canal. It never was either, and you knew it too, when you made such a flourish about presentin' me with that stock."

"All of which I admit," says Pepper. "Yet for nearly twelve months I've been out there plugging away at that same discredited hole in the ground."

"You have?" says I.

"Look at those hands," says he, holdin' out a pair of calloused lunch hooks that would have done credit to a Dago hod-carrier.

"I should say they carried the autograph of honest toil," says I.

"Perhaps you would like to know why I was foolish enough to make such a monumental ass of myself?" says Pepper.

"I ain't missin' a word," says I.

"Well, then," he goes on, "it was merely because, in a moment of gratitude to a certain red haired youth who not only helped me out of a tight box, but insisted in keeping a sublime faith in me, I gave my word of honor that I would go and try it. Do you remember, Torchy?"

Did I? Say, it was that grip of Belmont Pepper's hand and the way he looked me square in the eyes as he left, that made it seem all the harder when Mr. Robert sprung this expose on me.

"Mr. Pepper," says I, "I take it all back. Maybe you're the slickest ever and I'm still in the Rube class, but you've got me shinnyin' on your side again."

"Thank you, Torchy," says he. "And the Lord knows I need it."

"Then the mine didn't pan?" says I.

"No," says he. "I knew it wouldn't; but it gave me something to do and— Well, it kept me from worse folly. Of course, I know very little about gold mining anyway, and perhaps I shouldn't have recognized pay ore if I'd found it. Just to make sure though, I brought East a lot of the stuff and had it tested."

"Well?" says I.

"Just about gold enough in a ton of that rock to plug a front tooth with, that's all," says he. "Want to see some of the precious stuff?"

I looked over the pieces he handed me and then dropped 'em back in the bag.

"Fine showing for a year of the hardest work I ever did in my life, isn't it?" says he, bitter and sarcastic. "And such a year! Why, I lived in an old shack hardly fit to keep a dog in, cooked my own meals, washed my own

clothes, and went weeks without speaking to a human being. Those who did happen along either told me I was a fool or set me down as crazy; all but that chap from Bullfrog, who turned out to be a card sharp. He just about cleaned out what little cash I had left. Hence my present costume. You see, I had to save enough to pay for the assay. Maybe you'd like to read the report? Here it is," and he fishes a pink sheet out of his hip pocket.

"As you are one of the chief surviving stockholders, Torchy," he goes on, "I'll will you that, and the bag of specimens, too. I'm done with hard work and the narrow path. I know a dozen easy ways of separating people from their money; and by the eternal, I'm going to try some of 'em on again."

"Then—then," I begins, "that gumshoe post-office agent, and all them women you was being mobbed by that day, was right? You had been doing bunk turns, eh?"

"My little enterprises do not always have the hearty approval of the Federal Government, I admit," says he. "But haven't I tried the other way, too? And see what I've earned! What's the use?"

Say, I didn't know the answer. Only somehow it seemed a shame that a top liner like Belmont Pepper couldn't use them ninety horsepower thought works of his in a game that wouldn't

have him dodgin' deputy sheriffs. Not knowin' what else to do, I took to studyin' the assay office report.

"Say, Mr. Pepper," says I, stumblin' on something that puzzled me, "what's this item here mean?"

"Don't ask me," says he. "I read only as far as the second line, about the gold and silver traces. What else do you find?"

"Why, about this platinum yield," says I. "Ain't that a big percentage?"

"Hanged if I know," says he, sort of careless.

"But I heard only the other day," says I, "that this platinum stuff was worth more'n gold."

"Eh?" says he, grabbin' the pink sheet. "Why, it does look as if that fool assayer had found a lot of platinum in one of those lumps. Forty per cent.! Why—why— See here, Torchy, what is it they use platinum for, anyway?"

"Ain't it for settin' diamonds in?" says I.

"You're right!" says Pepper, slappin' his knee excited. "I remember, now. There was one vein that I thought was silver at first, and then decided it wasn't because it was so hard. Great Scott! Why, there may be hundreds—yes, thousands of pounds of it in that hole. Torchy, perhaps we've struck it, after all.

Now let's see; I wonder if there are any more samples that show it."

In another minute the two of us has the bag up on the bench between us and we're pawin' it over excited.

"Whoop!" says Pepper, bringin' up a chunk. "Here's another! And it *is* platinum, Torchy; I'll bet a million it is!"

"Maybe you'll have a million to bet, who knows," says I.

"We will, you mean," says he. "This is an equal split, Torchy, if anything comes of it. Meanwhile, let's calm down. It will take considerable capital to work this sort of a mine, and I'm sorry to say that my standing as a promoter would hardly reassure—"

"Then let me handle the finance end," says I. "Is it worth a third interest to get in a party that'll put up the cash?"

"It is just now," says he. "But where can you find one?"

"At the present minute," says I, "he ought to be about six blocks up Fifth-ave. from here, playin' billiards at his club and workin' up a dinner appetite. Let's go tackle him."

So, while Belmont Pepper waits around the corner, I walks into the club as bold as brass, calls Mr. Robert down to the reception room, and gives him the whole tale from start to finish. He shied some at Mr. Pepper's name

first off, but when I'd supplied all the details about how he'd given up the mine as a bad job, and how it was me first discovers the platinum item, Mr. Robert begun to get interested. He read the report all through, and held the specimens under a readin' glass, and finally I was sent out to tow in Belmont Pepper.

All that seems like it happened ages ago, though. Must have been a week anyway, for it took two days before Mr. Robert could get a private report of his own, and the third day we spent organizin' the company; and here I am, the big boss and actin' head of the Glory Be Platinum Company, even if I am doin' it under a guardian act which Mr. Robert said he was proud to apply for.

But you should have seen Belmont Pepper just before he caught the Chicago Limited yesterday on his way West.

"Gee!" says I. "You don't look like you was goin' out to start a mine. You're costumed to open a pink tea."

"I know," says he, "but the fact is, Torchy, after wearing a flannel shirt for twelve months, I couldn't resist the flossy raiment. And by the way, young man, you are not so shabbily tailored yourself to-day. Why the frock coat during business hours?"

"Ah, say!" says I. "It'll be 4.30 soon, won't it? And if I'm due to call on a young

lady at 5.15, what would I be wearin'—jumper and overalls, eh? So long as I cut out the spats and the walkin' stick, don't you worry."

Was it Miss Vee? Well, say, who was it I made my big plunge for, anyway?

THE END